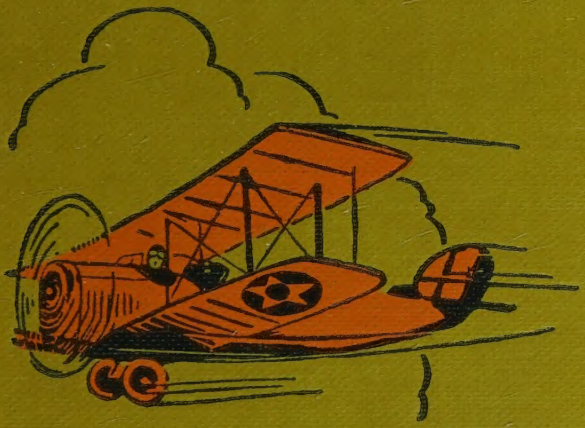
# REX LEE
# ROUGH RIDER OF THE AIR



THOMSON BURTIS

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## ROUGH RIDER OF THE AIR

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AN INSTANT LATER THE PACK WAS BOUNCING ABOVE HIM.
*Rex Lee : Rough Rider of the Air.* *Frontispiece.*

# REX LEE,
# ROUGH RIDER OF THE AIR

BY

THOMSON BURTIS

AUTHOR OF
REX LEE, GYPSY FLYER
REX LEE ON THE BORDER PATROL
REX LEE, RANGER OF THE SKY
REX LEE, NIGHT FLYER, ETC.

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# REX LEE, ROUGH RIDER OF THE AIR

## CHAPTER I

### A TRAIN ROBBERY

Lieutenant Rex Lee, temporarily of the Army Air Service, was flying his big De Haviland bomber across what seemed like a limitless desert of mesquite. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and he was returning from Donovan Field at San Antonio to his present station with the McMullen flight of the Border Patrol.

He had been sent to Donovan with a worn-out ship and was flying back a brand new replacement.

The young flyer was curiously contented as he started the last fifty miles of the two-hundred-and-fifty-mile trip. He had not intended to stay on active service in the Army so long

but to go back to civilian aviation. However, when he had been ordered from Kentucky to his old post on the Border Patrol, there had been something irresistibly attractive about it.

He glanced occasionally at his instrument board, reading the altimeter, tachometer, oil pressure gauge, centigrade thermometer and other instruments with eyes which took in every meaning in the movement of a needle.

Beneath his goggles which hid his gray eyes, his lean face was tanned to an almost leathery hue by the Texas sun, and the coveralls which he wore could not completely mask the slim lines of his lean figure and the shoulders which were unusually wide.

A spanking breeze was on the tail, the twelve-cylinder Liberty was turning up fifteen hundred, throttled, without a miss, and there was absolutely nothing on his mind. Instead of taking the direct air line across a hundred and fifty miles of mesquite, he was flying the longer route, following the railroad.

There were some landing fields and clearings along the railroad. Rex never believed in taking unnecessary chances unless there was a good reason for it. Had there been any impor-

tant reason to do so, he would have flown an air line across the mesquite and gambled the matter of his comfort against the failure of the motor. As it was, he had no reason for haste except the desire to get a bath, a drink of water and some clean clothes.

He peered ahead down the railroad at intervals, in a casual manner. When he spotted the three-car train which ran daily—taking nearly twenty-four hours each way—from San Antonio to McMullen, he thought he might drop down and wave hello to old Pete Young, the engineer, as well as Hank Jaffray, the conductor. The flight had been at McMullen for nearly four years, and they knew every chick, child and pig in the town. The townspeople were proud of the flight. They had landed their share of rustlers, smugglers and others prone to operate without the law.

The patrol consisted of a dozen flights between the Gulf of Mexico and the Gulf of California, which daily patrolled that troublesome border and were alert, at all times, to answer a call for help and see what machine guns from the air could do. One can readily realize how aërial rangers, as it were, riding airplanes capa-

ble of a hundred and twenty miles an hour, could become somewhat of a threat to the sinful.

Far ahead Rex saw a dot against the two shining lines of track. It was the train. The right of way was just a cut through limitless mesquite which reached the sky line on all sides. At intervals of a few miles there was a tiny station, serving some ranch, but there wasn't a real town along its entire length save for the fifty miles just outside of the two termini.

Rex did not note, at the time, that the train was motionless. In fact, when it was running at full speed you had to look twice to see whether it was standing still or not. It consisted of a combination freight, express and mail car, a day coach, and what was confidently believed to be the first Pullman ever built by that noted company. If not the first, it had lived the toughest life, anyhow. The road was just a branch line, and its speed schedule allowed the engineer to enjoy a full conversation while passing a cow-puncher sitting on a fence.

He was not more than seven or eight miles from the train, and close to four thousand feet

high, when Rex took another look over the side. There could be no doubt of the fact that the train was not moving.

An instant later his neck was craned way over the side. As he held his goggles to keep them from blowing around in the propeller blast, he was straining his eyes at nothing else but an airplane. It was on the ground, in a pretty good field next to the railroad track, and the train had stopped alongside of it.

Rex started down. He cut the motor to seven hundred revolutions and went into as steep a dive as a De Haviland is supposed to stand, which isn't very steep. He kept his eyes on the train, and as he got over it, twenty-five hundred feet high, and started to spiral, he noted a few things which made his heart leap a bit.

Not a soul was out of the train, for one thing. For another, there were a half dozen horses tethered in the mesquite. In the third place, one man had rushed from the express car, taken a look, and dived back in like a rabbit.

"Ship must have had a forced landing and flagged the train," Rex was thinking. He increased the speed of the dive every second, un-

consciously. "But why those horses? And why isn't anybody out of the cars?"

He was roaring downward at two hundred miles an hour, and the ground was rushing up at him as if it would hit him in the face in another minute. He was perhaps a thousand feet high, as eight men, or about that many, erupted from various cars as if they'd been shot from a catapult. Six of them ran toward the horses, turning at intervals and firing in the air toward the cars.

Two others had leaped for the airplane—and the airplane's motor was running.

"A train robbery!" Rex shouted to himself, unheard above the whine of the tortured wires and the roaring of the motor. "Didn't I drop in at the right time!"

The horsemen could wait. Lee made for the plane. He was less than five hundred feet high when the men threw a sack into the cockpit and vaulted in themselves.

"A new wrinkle, taking the swag away to Mexico by plane!" Rex was telling himself.

He was five hundred feet north of the field as he hunched down behind the windshield and went into a nose dive which had the ton and a

half bomber shaking as if it would burst into a thousand pieces. His hand found the machine gun controls, and he fired a burst to make sure the guns were working. Still no life from the cars as the plane and its two passengers got under way for the take-off.

He was two hundred feet back of them, and a hundred feet high as they started. He had forgotten safety and the limitations of a frail D.H. He was coming like the wind in a hurry. He didn't want to shoot them in cold blood if he could help it.

But he knew something else he could do. In one last swoop he got the D.H. within three feet of the ground. He was going like a cannon ball, straight for the fleeing plane. It was scudding down the field, and seemed about to take off any second.

He bore down on it like a three-thousand-pound thunderbolt. He was going two hundred and twenty miles an hour if he was moving at all. Now he had his head out the side, to see better, and the force of the air stream just about suffocated him.

Ten feet back of the outlaw plane he eased back on the stick, ever so little. It was a mat-

ter of inches whether he ruined his prop or not, but he made it. His undercarriage crashed against the trailing edge of their upper left hand wing just as they were taking off.

Just what happened, he didn't know. He guessed he had hit them too solidly. The shock shook the De Haviland as if it had hit a stone wall. In an instant the struts were dancing and the wires vibrating until they were wide blurs. Perhaps he'd nicked the prop, too—the motor seemed to be shaking itself loose from its base, and the roar of it became ugly and uneven.

He was zooming upward, and he looked back while his hand tightened on his trembling control stick. The ship below had been flipped over on its back and was hidden in a cloud of dust. People were pouring from the cars, now, and streaming toward the wreck.

For an instant Lee hesitated. He knew that almost inevitably that shock, plus the terrific vibration, meant that his landing gear was at least a partial wreck and that a landing meant a crack up. Over on the other side of the train, almost a half mile from him, six riders were galloping like mad through the mesquite. He

could round them up, but would the ship last? Such quivering meant that the fuselage had been weakened, and doubtless that the propeller was out of balance.

"I've got to crack up anyway; might as well risk it," he told himself as he banked toward the riders.

He throttled the motor to reduce the vibration as much as possible. As he shot toward the fugitives he happened to look upward for a second. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Two thousand feet above him, diving downward at an ungodly rate, was another airplane. It was small and chunky and seemed to be gaudily painted, although he couldn't get the colors clearly. It wasn't an Army ship, that was certain.

"Seems to be an aërial convention out here in the desert," he told himself.

For a second he was badly scared. Events had happened with such rapidity that he was in a sort of daze. For a second he thought that the strange ship must be an ally of the ground bandits. Then he came to himself, and realized how foolish that thought was.

Nevertheless, it seemed uncanny for that

plane to be there at the moment. He felt like passengers on ocean liners must feel these days, as if they'd get an airplane tangled in their hair any second.

Then he forgot that other ship as the vibration of his own had him jumping in his seat. The horsemen were directly below him.

"The mesquite's the best place to come down if I'm minus an undercarriage, anyway!" he told himself, whistling to keep up his courage, and dived.

He fired a hail of bullets from the machine guns on the cowling fifty feet or so ahead of the fleeing riders, as a gentle warning. And it worked.

They knew the border, and the capabilities of the patrol's guns, evidently. Their last hope gone, knowing that Rex could wipe them out with one shower of bullets, they hauled their horses up short. In an instant Rex was around in a bank. He swooped down close to them, motioning back toward the train.

They started like a flock of sheep, their horses trotting along dejectedly. They didn't even try an abortive shot at him. They were licked.

At any second Rex expected the propeller to dash itself into pieces, or some part of the ship to fall off. There wasn't a wire or strut or spar that wasn't trembling. But he had to ride herd on his captives until a dozen or so men were on their way from the train could take charge of them. So he circled, watching the dashboard instrument needles which were leaping from one side of each gauge to the other.

Suddenly the drone of the other motor undertoned Rex's. He was about three hundred feet high, and that strange ship swooped past him, not fifty feet away from his right wing tip.

The tall passenger in the front seat was gesturing frantically. He pointed to Rex's undercarriage. Rex nooded. The last doubt in his mind as to what lay ahead of him was dissipated.

Rex didn't feel so good, but he was conscious of a vague feeling of surprise at what he read on the side of the ship.

"Barr-Maxwell Circus" was painted down the side of the fuselage, and from what Rex could see the name inscription was on both the upper and lower wings. The rudder was yellow, the elevators blue, and the letters yellow

on a blue background. The motor cowling was red. It was a flying crazy quilt.

"I've seen billboards of that show's coming to McMullen, at that," Rex told himself. "Must be a ship for advertising and publicity, I guess——"

It had banked and suddenly it was passing Rex again. His eyes froze to that passenger in the front seat. He was standing up, and in his hands he was holding what was surely a parachute pack. He was pointing to Rex, and then pointing upward, as if trying to make him understand something.

"What does he want?" Rex asked himself dazedly, and got no answer. "What good does a chute in his ship do to me?"

Again he came by, and again pointed skyward. He wanted Rex to get higher. Rex nodded, but he had no more idea what was in his mind than he had of the thoughts of the King of Siam.

Lee had to spend a moment more with his captives. When he saw them safely in the hands of the passengers, a quarter of a mile from the train, his predicament commenced to assume real proportions. Something had to be

done right away. The people on the ground were also making motions, and one of them had taken a wheel from the wrecked ship and was throwing it into the air.

"This tub'll never hold together long enough for me to get to water to land in," Rex was thinking. "The mesquite, I guess—I wish I had a parachute."

Again that drone, and again that gaudy ship swooped past, the passenger gesticulating wildly and holding up that parachute.

Rex couldn't imagine anything in the world that could be done for him. And yet that other chap must have some crazy idea in his head. And it might work. But what was Rex to decide? If he went higher, and the ship went to pieces, he'd be killed inevitably. On the other hand, he was close to the ground, and could get down and crack up, probably, before the ship went out of control.

It was the thought of the almost inevitable fire which decided him. He'd take a chance.

And so he sent his reeling, staggering ship into a climb. The noise was terrific. The motor seemed to be clanging as well as roaring; the wires were screaming shrilly, and it

sounded as though pieces of wood were knocking against each other. His feet couldn't hold the floor, they were drumming a tattoo against the rudder bar. Down below every living soul was lined up by the train, their heads tipped back as they watched.

The other ship was twelve hundred feet high as Lee reached a thousand. His fascinated eyes then beheld an amazing sight. That passenger, a chute on his back, was climbing out of the cockpit and inching himself along a wing. He apparently had something else slung around him, too, like wire or rope.

Now that ship was circling. Rex watched him as he swung easily down to the undercarriage.

"He must be one of the circus acrobats," he thought, "or else a professional dare-devil, but what good does that do me?"

He sat on the spread bar of the undercarriage, finally leaning against the air stream as he appeared to be busying himself with his shoe laces or something. Rex was close now, and his eyes were popping against his goggles as he tried to make out what he was up to. He

saw him remove the parachute, and he seemed to be tying something to it.

It was safety wire! Rex got his idea. But there was only a few feet of it, not more than three, and of all the desperate chances he had ever seen that would be the worst. He couldn't ease up close enough to grab the chute without the chances being strongly in favor of a collision which would bring both ships down.

Right there the other man did his stuff, and Rex let out a yip of pure, unadulterated horror. As though he'd been blown off his perch, his body went backward, and the next second he was hanging by his ankles from the undercarriage.

Then Rex saw what he had done. His ankles were tied, so he could not fall. There he hung, fifteen hundred feet above the earth, his body swaying backward. In his hand he held the end of a three-foot wire, to which was attached the parachute pack, blown backward by the propeller blast.

Rex settled down for the flying, which meant unquestionably the difference between possible safety and sure smash. His ship wouldn't last

another five minutes. The motor was cutting out now, as the carburetor float went wrong, due to the vibration. They were flying straight, level and slow.

Rex got behind them and under them. He gave his ship full gun, and went past them, twenty feet below that dangling figure. He couldn't ease up to them from behind. A foot's miscalculation and his propeller would catch that hanging figure.

When he was fifty feet ahead of them Rex throttled slightly, and went into ever so slight a climb. They were dropping downward, slowly. Rex's head was turned, his eyes focused on that parachute pack.

A second later, and his belt was unfastened. Flying automatically, he thought that pack was the center of the universe. Now their propeller was whirring over his head. An instant later, and the pack was bouncing above him.

He let go the stick, stood up, and made a wild grab. He got it!

As he sunk back into his seat and grabbed the stick he was still looking upward, gazing, for the first of many times into the eyes of the man he was to come to know as Buck Rariden.

It was just a fleeting glance; his pilot whisked the ship upward as Rex sent his into a dive, to prevent the propeller's tangling with the man who'd saved him. He saw a long, bony face, with a grin on it, and bold eyes that stared into his own with hard enjoyment of the situation. And all the time his jaws were working rhythmically on the cud of tobacco in his right cheek.

Lee worked frantically to get the chute on. A quick glance assured him that it was a U. S. Irving type, already tested by the Army but not then regular equipment for flyers. The seat pack chute had not been developed at that time.

He did not know whether it was folded properly or not.

"It's a pull off for me," he decided, "and I've got to work fast."

Heading for that open field next to the train, Rex inched himself out on the fuselage, one hand on the stick. The ship almost shook him off. He was like an ant riding well-shaken jelly. Finally he was flat on his stomach, one hand on the stick and the other on the rip cord, hanging on by his feet and knees.

As he got over the field he pulled the rip cord. He was at the side of the field farthest from the train, so that there's be no danger of its falling on anyone.

He felt the pilot chute snap out, and the next second he hit the tail controls heavily as he was whisked from his perch. Then he was swinging in the air over the mesquite, his body even with the chute at the end of each arc. He was safe.

A moment later the De Haviland crashed in a ball of fire, and he was grasping the shroud lines, slipping the big silk umbrella sideward to get over the field. As he floated downward the circus ship sped past him, the hand of the passenger raised in jovial salute as it winged its way southward.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRANGE FACE OF DUKE DALY

THE people on the ground were cheering as Rex descended. One man was running toward the spot where he would alight, according to his drift.

"There's a guy with some sense," he said to himself approvingly, as he seemed to be dropping with ever-increasing speed. "In this breeze the chute'll be hard to handle."

When one gets close to the ground in a chute, the speed of the drop seems to increase by leaps and bounds until fifteen feet a second feels like the speed of a scout. Rex got hold of the shroud lines, and a second later he hit as he tried to pull himself upward to ease the shock.

His knees bent like jackknives, and he sprawled on the ground. The next second the wind caught the billowing silk, and he was bumped along the ground as he tried to un-

strap the harness. His fumbling fingers couldn't find the release. Then he caught up with his chute. It folded around him, swathing him hand and foot, with enough surface exposed to the freshening Gulf breeze to send both him and it rolling and thumping along the ground.

He threshed wildly and just as he was working loose, breathless and red faced, he heard quiet chuckles from without. Hands ripped the white silk away, and suddenly he was out in the sunshine again. He had bruises all over his body, dirt in his mouth, and sand in his eyes.

"Hello, Rex," came a quiet voice, and he was staring up into a pair of familiar gray eyes.

Rex thought he was having a dream. He took three looks at the oncoming stream of people and decided that he wasn't totally cuckoo, after all.

"Duke Daly!" he gasped, and put up one arm weakly.

Duke shook hands briefly and said with a chuckle, which was unusual:

"I've been homesick for the border for a long time. Now I know why!"

He helped Rex to his feet and, as the vanguard of the spectators arrived, a film seemed to draw over those gray eyes. He was as aloof and impersonal as if he had been a well-tailored image. That was the Duke Daly Rex had known. Never, until that moment when he was leaning over him, had Rex seen warm humaneness in Duke Daly's eyes, except sometimes when he was with the man who was apparently his only friend, Tex MacDowell.

There were plenty of excited, inarticulate comments, questions and exclamations from the crowd regarding the events of the past few minutes, and finally, on the way back to the train, Rex had a chance to inject a few of his own.

"It was a train robbery, of course?" he asked Duke, and the Duke nodded.

"It seems that the McMullen bank was getting a shipment of several hundred thousand dollars from San Antone," he told Rex evenly. "This gang stopped the train by means of flagging it after landing the plane. Then they just took charge, got into the express car, wounded

the two men inside, and were about to escape when you dropped in."

"Hurt anybody in the crash?" Rex inquired.

"Slightly, but they're all in custody, of course—guarded by their own guns."

"Pretty carefully laid plot," Rex remarked. "Flossy of 'em, using a plane to make sure of the swag, eh?"

"It's pretty certain that well-known Mexican oil field hijackers are the leaders," Daly informed him. It seemed that he was talking casually to an idle acquaintance. "If so, it's a fair haul. The flyer is a German, and the ship from Mexico. It would have been close to a three-hundred-thousand-dollar job, if it had worked. The men were masked and, by scattering, probably could have escaped. Two Mexicans in it."

Rex took a look at them, tied securely in the express car, but recognized none of them.

"I sure hope I see that gazabo that saved my bacon," Rex commented to Daly. "He must be bound for McMullen, and in that case he'll land at the field. It's an advance ship for a circus, and he must be an acrobat hired for publicity exhibitions."

"Whatever he is, he's got a head on him."

"And guts," Rex added, "He knew, of course, that his head would be within a foot of a prop. What a bump might have done to him is nobody's business."

Which was no more than the exact truth.

"And now tell me," Rex asked as they climbed into the Pullman car. "How did you get down here—and why?"

"Just a visit," the Duke said casually, which didn't necessarily mean that what he said was the truth at all.

They settled into a seat and for a few minutes fought off excited people who wanted to talk. Rex knew most of them—McMullenites—and escaped on the plea that he was tired. That being over, he took a good look at the self-contained Daly.

It had been two years since Rex had seen him. For a few weeks he had been one of the McMullen flight, and then, in a night fight with some smuggling airplanes, he'd done as pretty and reckless a piece of flying as Rex had ever looked at. He saved Tex MacDowell's life, and they got the smugglers; but the Duke had come out of it with a slight limp which the doctors

said would make him physically ineligible for Army flying. He'd left the Army; and disappeared, as far as the flight was concerned.

Almost a year later, however, a Secret Service man named Graves, who had been the flight's superior in rounding up this smuggling gang, had suddenly sent for Tex MacDowell. There was a smuggling job on the Canadian Border that needed planes, and Daly, a civilian, and Tex, an Army man, were appointed special agents under Graves and got their men. Tex had come back—he had been Daly's one friend, as far as Rex knew—with just brief news that Daly was O.K. and that it was probable that he'd work as a special agent under Graves from then on.

Daly was staring out at the mesquite as the train wheezed and bumped along on the last lap of its trip, and as Rex watched him he wished for the thousandth time that he knew what was underneath that impenetrable shell which the Duke showed to the world. He suspected that Tex MacDowell knew the Duke's inmost secrets, but Rex was willing to bet that no other living human did, unless it was the elderly Graves.

Duke Daly was the most remarkable looking man Rex had ever seen.

In the first place, although he was thirty, about six feet tall, and had lived an eventful life, his face was that of a too handsome boy of twenty-two who'd never been farther than the next township and whose most serious problem had been to decide which girl to take to the next dance. His hair was blond; his features were as regular as if cut by a sculptor, almost characterless, no lines whatever in the skin. That face was like a good-looking mask —good looking in the magazine cover sense. Nose straight as a die, lips rather thin but perfectly cut, clean-lined jaw which was neither strong nor weak, eyebrows as regular as if carefully adjusted by a painter. Its habitual expression was sort of brooding, Rex thought. The Duke smiled rarely and when he did it was just a slight widening of the mouth.

But here was the catch. His gray eyes were as different from his face as day is from night. To see him from the side, one would say a vapid college kid, a collar ad boy. One look into his eyes, and you knew you were before a man who had sampled much and seen a lot of

what he had not sampled. There was experience, and understanding and maturity in them.

It was sort of creepy, looking into the face of a pretty little child and seeing in its eyes the personality of a suffering soul.

The reason for this contradiction was simple. A wreck when he was a flying instructor had mashed his face up badly and forced the doctors to do a job of plastic surgery. They'd ended up by giving him a handsome, clear-cut cloak for his personality. Tex MacDowell, who seemed to consider himself in honor bound to reveal nothing whatever concerning Daly, nevertheless always gave Rex the impression that he considered the Duke one of the world's most unusual characters.

That was the tall chap who was sitting alongside Rex. Hair smoothly brushed, attired in an immaculate light gray suit and polished shoes, he was the coolest, cleanest, best dressed person on the train.

"The gang'll sure get a surprise when you heave in sight," Rex told him.

"No, I wired Tex," he replied.

"Sure it's just a visit, Duke?" Lee inquired.

The Duke turned toward him and smiled slightly.

"Uh-huh. I will say, though, that when I asked for leave, Mr. Graves said I might do a little snooping around about this Von Sternberg gang that you fellows have been following up."

He referred to a group of aërial smugglers under the leadership of a certain Von Sternberg. This man, a flyer, was at the moment a captive in a hospital at El Paso. They had hurt him when they bagged him—but he did not die as expected.

"You people think that the gang will continue to operate without their leader?" Rex asked him.

"Maybe. Graves thought I might run down into Mexico and find out."

"We've suspected, or Tex has, that Graves was using you often."

"He is. It's quite a bit of fun, too. You needn't let the information out, though. That is, outside of the flight. You fellows and I are in the same business, after all. But there's no need of the outside world knowing it."

"Right you are."

They chatted along quietly. If Rex hadn't seen that moment, back there after he'd landed, when the Duke was himself, a chuckling human being with warmth in his eyes, he would have figured that Daly barely remembered him and didn't give a hang whether they talked to each other or not. His indifference was not assumed. It couldn't be called superior, either. It didn't make anyone sore at him. It sort of wet blanketed them in a mysterious fashion. It didn't mean a thing to Rex, but some of the flight, he knew, looked at the Duke with bewildered, resentful awe. They couldn't figure him out.

He told him most of the high lights at McMullen before the train breezed into the station, then Rex took a look out of the window, and drew a long breath.

"The clans have gathered," he informed the Duke. "Darned if every living thing in McMullen isn't here. I'll bet the stores are closed."

In the lead was the towering figure of old Sheriff Trowbridge, at the head of enough deputies to arrest an army. Word had been wired

ahead, and Rex presumed the circus men had told their tale. An angry mob swirled around the station, the square surrounding it, and there was an overflow in adjacent streets.

"There's Tex—and Cap Kennard!" Lee exclaimed suddenly, and for some reason his eyes shifted to Daly's face as he peered out the window.

Again he changed. Those eyes were soft and warm, and the kind of affection which can only exist between two real men glowed within them. And MacDowell, his more than six feet sticking forth from the mob, was searching the train with a pair of sparkling eyes which didn't register any dread of the ordeal.

As Rex climbed off he became the center of attraction. A thousand congratulations were tossed at him before the mob scurried to the express car to watch the unloading of the bandit gang.

"Hello, Duke, glad to see you," came MacDowell's Southern drawl and, as the two men's hands met, stocky little Captain Kennard, his scarred face one wide grin, said raucously:

"Hi, Daly; welcome to our city. Rex, I understand you left a brand new ship up in the

mesquite. Can't you even take a quiet cross-country trip any more?"

"Came near digging a quiet grave for myself," Lee informed him. "Say, did those circus men land at the airdrome?"

"Sure did!" cackled the little C.O. "And that boy Rariden is probably the darnedest Irishman that ever spit twenty feet and hit a nail on the head!"

"Who is he?" asked Daly's voice as they shoved through the crowd.

"He's the manager of the circus that's going to play here in a week—Barr-Maxwell."

"What's the manager doing acting as his own press agent?" Rex demanded.

Penoch O'Reilly, one of the flyers, had traveled with a circus for a few months when but a budding youth, and through him the flight had soaked in information by the ton concerning tent shows. They knew almost everything from what the stake and chain wagon was to the technicalities of "zuluing."

"Oh, he's full of special schemes he wants to put over here," Kennard replied. "He's even considering making McMullen winter quarters for the show. He'll tell you."

"Just what happened, Rex, anyway?"

Rex happened to glance at the Duke at that moment. His face seemed funny, somehow—older, and his eyes bleaker.

"His name doesn't happen to be Buck Rariden, does it?" he asked suddenly.

"Right you are. Know him?" remanded Kennard.

"Ran into him around the race track a little. Eccentric egg," nodded Daly.

And yet, somehow, Rex thought that for some reason Daly was far from well pleased that Rariden was among them.

"I sure want to meet him," Rex stated. "He saved my onions—no doubt about that. And the one look I got at him made me want to get more. Well, the yarn is this."

Rex spun it. When he got to the ground section of the parachute jump Daly, who had sort of become humanized as he talked gayly with Tex, cut in. Again he let himself go, and was quite boyish.

"Let me tell that!" he begged, and tell it he did as they honked down the wide main street of the up-and-coming city of McMullen.

It was a great town, clean and good-looking

and not too hot, boasting a really beautiful hotel, good stores, and all modern conveniences from a Rotary Club to the Woman's Mental Improvement Society. But cow-punchers drifted down the street, and the old West wasn't far away. Being on the border, excitement was frequent. The mayor was Sam Edwards, ex-Texas Ranger, and the sheriff was Bill Trowbridge, border pioneer, and a lot of the wealthy and solid citizens were old-timers whose wives had stood beside them with rifles in the early cattle days. The town had a certain flavor which one couldn't find anywhere else but in the Southwest.

The Duke had Kennard in stitches, tooling the car all over the road as he laughed at an exaggerated description of Rex's movements and language.

"There's no doubt, though, seriously speaking," Daly concluded evenly, "that Buck Rariden did a good stunt."

"What about him, anyway?" Rex demanded. "What do you know about him?"

"Nothing. Just know him. Or knew him. He won't remember me. Don't mention what I said."

He started talking to Tex, both of them being in the back seat. MacDowell was a lean, wide-shouldered Texan who lounged his way easily through life, his wide-set gray eyes constantly on the lookout for excitement. His passion was to get himself into a deep hole, and then work his way out. A contest of any kind was meat and drink to him. He was just about the best flyer on the border. Occasionally he'd get discontented and broody, and then he'd mope or do something so reckless and crazy that you'd hold your breath. That was all the result of monotony, which was the one thing he couldn't stand.

Somehow, back in Duke Daly's few days along the border, he and Tex, out in the mesquite together for hours, had come to an understanding. Just what had happened to draw them so close together Rex didn't know. But it was there. And the impassive Duke was a different man when he was with his friend. Rex guessed that Daly lived a lonely life, at that.

As they drew into the small, sandy airdrome, Rex saw the gang reclining at ease on the porch of the recreation building, one of the

several frame structures along the southern edge of the field. On its eastern and western boundaries, corrugated iron hangers flanked the pocket handkerchief landing space, which was now shimmering in the rays of an exceedingly hot sun.

There were two D.H.'s on the line, just being readied for the last afternoon patrols. Alongside them was that kaleidoscopic circus ship.

"Sure looks natural," commented Daly.

"How long are you going to be with us, Duke?" queried the captain.

"I don't know. Few days, I guess. I may have to go down into Mexico."

He didn't tell them why, and Rex didn't put forth the information. He would tell them, of course, in time. For some reason, Rex got a hunch right then and there that the Duke would be sheltered in the bosom of the flight for some time. He really didn't believe that he'd traveled from Washington to the border to have a chat with Tex MacDowell.

The gang of eight khaki-clad flyers greeted them with a loud, raucous cheer as they drew up in a cloud of dust. Rex searched eagerly for the two strangers.

"They're getting cleaned up a little," Pop Cravath, the fat little adjutant, informed him.

Duke was making the rounds. Jimmy Jennings and Sleepy Spears and Pete Miller and Hickman and Cravath he knew. Dumpy Scarth and Percival Enoch O'Reilly were strangers to him, but he wasn't to them. Funny it was to watch the younger ones, and those who didn't know him, shake hands. They were almost respectful. He was a sort of legend around the border, a legend Rex aimed to fathom.

"Are the circus men going to stay out here?" Kennard asked of the mob in general.

"Sure are, thank Heaven!" Sleepy Spears yawned. "That is for Rariden. That pilot of his doesn't give me any appetite."

"Well," Rex informed them," "I'm going to the tents, and I desire an introducer. The time has come, as it were, to present my respects to my saviors and assure them of my regard and esteem. I——"

"Too bad they happened along," grinned Jack Beaman, an observer who was also supply officer. "If you'd kicked off I could have surveyed the fifteen flying suits I'm shy. I-——"

"The minute Jack heard of the wreck he galloped in and made out a survey for fifteen typewriters, eight machine guns, seventy instruments——"

"I'll bet," Kennard broke in, "that Rex's ship had at least a half million dollars' worth of property on it, according to Jack."

"Here he comes," boomed little P. Enoch O'Reilly. "Take a look at the man who holds all spitting records for speed, control and distance."

A tall, rangy figure was walking swiftly toward them. Rex doubted whether he'd ever seen a man or woman walk more gracefully. He just seemed to glide over the ground.

"Told us," Jimmy Jennings informed Rex, "that he'd started in the circus business as an acrobat when he was a kid."

Rex glanced at the Duke. Daly was not paying a great deal of attention to the on-coming Rariden, and his face was expressionless.

Rex's eyes shifted to the man he'd met high in the air, and as he came closer he felt an irresistible grin creeping over his face.

He was at least six feet two, and of that length about nine-tenths was leg. The dis-

tance from his waistline to the ground was a toll call. His shoulders were fairly wide, and his neck long. Above it was a long, thin, bony face, split by a humorously crooked nose. His cheek bones were very high, and the hollows below them could have held one of the Great Lakes apiece. His ears were large, and stuck out from his head like an elephant's. His blue eyes were prominent, below arched, sandy eyebrows. His hair stuck up on his head, a sandy red. And a multitude of freckles was sprinkled over all.

His jaws worked regularly, as if by machinery, and a plug of tobacco made the twenty-second lump in his face.

It was his expression, though, that being indescribable, shall forthwith be described to you. His wide mouth seemed stretched a bit into the hint of a lop-sided grin. His bold blue eyes rested steadily on Rex, below arched eyebrows, and there was a humorous sparkle in them; there was a hilarious cast to his whole face. It wasn't gentle humor; it was hard and reckless. It was the grin of a man looking down at his foe and saying:

"How do you like *those* apples?"

And to Rex it was irresistible. Those working jaws, that challenging, ludicrous look—a choice spirit, squinting with humorous recklessness at the world, was before him. From crooked nose to flapping ears he was of a mold which had been broken when he was made.

He was dressed in unpressed khaki pants, a blue shirt open at the neck and a vest which was unbuttoned.

"And this would be Rex!" he said as Lee got up to shake hands. "How's the boy? The chute come in handy, eh?"

"Sure did, Rariden. And thanks."

He crushed Rex's hand in a paw big enough to palm a bowling ball. When he walked, he carried his long arms hanging at his sides, those hams of hands limp at the end of them.

His eyes gleamed quizzically into Rex's and, without turning his head, he spat out the side of his mouth.

"Don't mention it," he commanded.

As he dropped his hand, his eyes were staring over Rex's shoulder. Those eyebrows went higher, until the tips almost met above his nose, and those bulging eyes were staring at Daly.

"Me name is Rariden—Buck Rariden," he stated.

He had a sort of expectation, at all times, in his expression, as if he were about to burst into surprised laughter. It was very obvious now.

"This is Bob Daly—used to be a flyer with the flight," Kennard said.

"Haven't I met ye before?" Rariden was saying as he shook hands.

"I don't think so," Daly said smoothly.

Rariden, entirely unembarrassed at the silent scrutiny of the flyers, dropped Daly's hand and shook his head.

"Mebbe I haven't," he admitted, "but the pan is sure familiar, some way."

He dropped down on the step and wiped his freckled brow. Then he expectorated with precision at a passing ant.

"The devil of an afternoon," he stated. "Now I must shoot a wire to Bill Hampton, a bum press agent, tellin' him to cash heavy on his boss bein' a hero. That's show business. Sure, it was lucky for the both of us, eh, Rex?"

"If there's anything I can do to help out publicity for your show," Rex told him with

sincerity, "I'll talk to every reporter in Texas."

"We need it, me lad," grinned Rariden.

His voice was a very deep bass, the result of years of shouting around a circus lot. You notice the same kind of voice in men who use their vocal chords a lot in the open air.

Suddenly his eyes, which had flitted to Daly's composed face periodically, seemed to bulge a bit more. His grin became almost a sneer.

"Cut it out, Duke Daly," he rasped. "You know me!"

The Duke's eyes met Rariden's steadily. Suddenly it seemed as if every man was drawn and that electricity was crackling between the two.

"What happened to the pan?" Rariden went on, challenging Daly. "Ye changed, since ye was bettin' commissioner for the Clover Stable."

Again silence, while Daly flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"Airplane crack up—mashed face—doctors gave me a new one," he said quietly. "Sure, I knew you, Buck, but I figured you wouldn't

know me—and might feel better if I didn't know you."

"Why?"

Rariden spat the word, and the next second he relieved his mouth of the huge cud of tobacco.

"You know why!"

## CHAPTER III

### BUCK RARIDEN, SHOWMAN

For a full half minute there was a silence which you could cut with a knife. The little knot of flyers were as motionless as so many Southern negroes when the boss is out of sight. Daly, tall and slim and almost icy in his composure, was leaning negligently against the railing. Buck Rariden was standing at the foot of the steps, facing them all like a lean tiger. Sleepy Spears' eyes were open, and very bright, and Tex MacDowell's were blazing pools.

Rariden's skin seemed rubbery; the deep wrinkles around his mouth changed in size and depth all the time, and his lips twisted themselves into a zizzag sneer.

"Cut out the mystery," he snarled.

There was enmity in the making between the two men. It seemed as if Rariden resented the almost contemptuous composure which was

Daly's, and that Daly shrank from the unkempt circus man as if from something unclean. Partly because he had saved his life, and partly for instinctive reasons, Rex felt himself taking Rariden's part.

"Strikes me you're making a fool of yourself, Buck," Daly told him evenly. "I'm not doing any talking. I didn't recall myself to you, because I thought you might be embarrassed if you knew that one of your old acquaintances was around."

Every word was as clear cut and cold as a diamond. Daly gave the impression that the whole thing was beneath bothering with, as far as he was concerned. He was the superior being, inspecting the vagaries of an ordinary mortal with passionless curiosity.

And Buck Rariden's goat was frisking all over the shimmering airdrome. Not a one of them breathed, Rex thought, as his lean body tensed and his brows came low over his eyes and his red hair seemed to snap and crack with the power of his wrath.

"Ye've talked too much already. What do I care? I didn't be no saint, at all, in them early days. Where do *you* git so high an' mighty,

Mister Duke Daly? Just a race track hanger-on, ye was then—and I don't suppose ye ever did any sure-thing gamblin', did ye?"

If Rex had breathed before, he stopped breathing then. Daly's face never changed. That film over his eyes was a curtain, dropped to hide any feeling within. Surprises were coming so thick and fast that Rex's brain was stunned. Daly had been a race track man, had he? And now he was being accused of being a professional gambler. So those were some of the things behind that mask of his.

Right then Rex got a look at Tex MacDowell. That drawling Texan's bronzed face mirrored such suffering that he was like a different man. The devil-may-care flyer had turned into a pleading beggar. It seemed that what Rariden said had hurt him, and not Daly.

Then and there Rex knew that Rariden had spoken the truth. As Daly spoke, the tension seemed to increase, instead of diminish.

"I was a professional gambler when I was younger, yes," Duke said precisely. "How did you find that out, Buck? And what does it matter, anyhow?"

He never glanced at the gang of men who

were getting the low-down on him. His eyes held Rariden's, and the contempt in them was increased. He was figuratively drawing his skirts away from the contamination of the showman.

"Not a darned thing, yer honor; pardon me for bein' so bold as to spake to ye. But what right've ye got to step in an' try to crab me in one o' the biggest deals——"

"Don't be an ass! You're crabbing yourself, if there's any being done!"

Rariden's huge hands were working spasmodically, and the cords in his whiplike forearms were distended. Something in the icy, unutterably superior composure of Daly was driving him mad, and he needed a safety valve. Rex felt sorry for the Irishman.

"I'll tell ye all, and be darned to ye!" he roared suddenly. Then, so abruptly that Rex felt as if a paper wad thrown at him had turned into a cannon ball and smacked him, Buck laughed.

And when he laughed, he laughed. His face was a mass of wrinkles, and he chuckled and snorted and gasped.

"My confound temper—fool that I am! Sure

you're right, Daly, but ye got my goat with your not ricognizin' me when ye knew who I was.

"I got t' tell 'em all, now. I hope to goodness I ain't crabbed in McMullen through my own foolishness."

But when he looked at Daly, his hilarity seemed savage. He was trying to hide his resentment.

Once again, though, he was bold and humorous, those eyebrows raised quizzically as he stared challengingly at the world. The flyers relaxed as he placed a new supply of tobacco in his mouth. Almost every pair of eyes stole toward Daly. The Duke was standing in that same negligent posture, but Tex MacDowell was alongside of him, leaning on his shoulder as if to mutely express the fact that he was with him, right or wrong.

"When I met the Duke, here, on the New York tracks ten years ago, I'd just got out o' jail," stated Rariden. "Deuce of a note, eh?"

Captain Kennard found his voice. And he barely repressed a chuckle at the Irishman's naïve query.

"Jail is always a deuce of a note. What were you in for?"

Now Rariden did one of his kaleidoscopic changes again. He became softer and sort of pleading in an ingenous way.

"For bein' lot superintendent of a crooked carnival," he told them, his eyes flickering toward Daly. "Listen, boys, I want t' tell ye a little about it. I know where ye stand in this town, and ye can ruin me if I don't convince ye I ain't so bad.

"I was born with a carnival, and I been in tent shows all my life—bein' everything from a acrobat to a manager. In them early days most circuses and carnivals, specially carnivals, was crooked. Gamblin' wheels run wide open, and most of 'em was braced. Forty-nine Camps, short changin', a mob o' grifters—from three-card monte men t' confidence boys—all was a part of it. The racket was strong. The only limit on the Forty-nine Camp was whether or not the show could afford the graft the city officials wanted t' let 'em run. A ticket seller that couldn't make a sucker think he was gettin' ten dollars change with five one-dollar bills couldn't get a job.

"That's all I knowed. That was my business, workin' with carnivals then. And wher old man Grady, manager and owner o' the Three Star Carnival, decided to work too raw and then got in wrong with the officials o' this town o' Knightsville, I was among them that went t' jail—and plenty—for crooked gamblin' wheels, short changin' and aidin' and abettin' more schemes to separate the rubes from their dough than I got hairs in me head.

"They even prosecuted us because the wild man in the freak show was a tame black feller."

This last remark, with his mouth twisted humorously and those eyes sparkling forth with bold zest, set Rex off on a laugh in which he wasn't alone. Buck Rariden was sore at the narrow-minded rubes who wouldn't let a show do its stuff; that was a cinch.

"That's that. I ain't denyin' it. From the time when I was ten years old and Diamont Front Murphy taught me the shell game and three-card monte, I probably separated more suckers from their kale, and later on managed more people that did, than any man my age. That was up to the war—and I didn't know no better.

"After that—I was a mechanic in the Air Service myself with the 62nd Pursuit—things was different. I got wise to myself, for one reason. But I ain't claimin' that I suddenly got religion. I still hate t' give suckers an even break."

He was looking at Rex as he gave vent to that last remark. Rex just threw back his head and laughed, uncontrollably. The next second the whole group was chortling loudly. It was like a brief relief from nervous tension, for Rex imagined every man had been thinking of Duke Daly. Rariden's face was so naïve at the moment that his wistful statement was irrestibly humorous as well as heartfelt.

An orderly from the near-by cavalry post came dashing up on a motorcycle, bearing official documents for the captain. During this interruption, Rex drifted a little way from the porch, in the company of Sleepy Spears. Spears was a stocky, square-faced young gentleman who always appeared to be in a coma during daylight hours; that is, unless an emergency dropped down among them. Then he acted as if his customary somnolence was merely a device for saving up an unusual sup-

ply of energy. He was incorrigibly good-humored, a veteran of the patrol, and as mature, mentally, as any active flyer in the whole Army.

Rex glanced over at the Duke, and Sleepy's heavily lidded eyes gazed drowsily in the same direction. Suddenly a wave of revulsion for what had happened rolled over Rex.

"Rariden sure knocked the pins from under the Duke," he remarked thoughtfully to Sleepy. "I don't guess he meant it maliciously——"

"He was sore at the moment," Sleepy said gently.

"If I know that Daly bozo at all," Rex went on, "he's as sensitive as they make 'em. If he ever was in trouble, he's suffered over it himself without any public humiliation being necessary to torture him more. And now he's nailed to the cross before the whole gang——"

"And the gang I'll bet he wants to stand in with more than any other," nodded Spears.

Rex took another look. Daly was just standing there, outwardly as cool and indifferent as ice. Then he looked in Rex's direction, as if

reading his thoughts, and Rex saw suffering eyes.

"Look at the boys," Lee said venomously. "Not a one of them can keep their eyes off him. The great Duke Daly, professional gambler and race track man!"

"It's tough," Sleepy mused. The orderly was getting aboard his throbbing monster, preparing to leave. "I always knew that there was something unusual in his past. He's such a queer duck—always had a shell nobody could get under. Seemed to brood a lot. I wonder if Tex knew——"

"I'm sure he did."

A sudden thought struck Rex as they started back toward the porch.

"Suppose that maybe his bad leg wasn't the real reason for his leaving the Service so hurriedly?" Rex inquired. "Maybe they got wise to him and suggested that he resign."

Sleepy considered the suggestion.

"I wouldn't doubt it," he said finally, "but what a stunt he did!"

"Sure. It saved Tex MacDowell's life, and Tex is one man on earth he worships."

"The only one," Sleepy added, "that I be-

lieve he gives a darn about, say nothing of actually liking. Well, whatever it is, I feel sorry for him now. That's the penalty of a past. It usually comes up and smacks you in the nose some time."

Rex stopped him; they were getting within earshot.

"He's supposed to be a sort of assistant for Graves, and you know where Graves stands in the Federal Service," Rex recalled to him. "It must be Graves knows all about him and doesn't care."

"Uh-huh. Anyhow, hang this Rariden guy for putting him over the jumps that way! Ever think how it would feel to be plastered a crook before your buddies?"

Rex knew, almost. Whenever one gets caught, publicy, with the goods on, it's anything but pleasant.

"For some reason or other, though," Rex said ruefully, "I can't generate very much of a hate against Rariden."

"Naturally not," smiled Sleepy. "More remarkable, I can't myself, but darned if I don't sympathize with Daly, if he's on the level now!"

"Well," Captain Kennard was saying as they dropped on the steps, "you were enunciating your philosophy, never to give a sucker an even break."

The stubbly, spike-pompadoured little C.O. glanced at Daly in a covert manner. You wouldn't think it to look at his battered countenance, or to listen to his forthright, raucous speech, but the captain was softer hearted than a husband while his wife's crying.

They all shifted their thoughts to Rariden, as a relief from the knowledge which had come to them with all the effect of a bomb in a bird cage.

If Rariden noted any peculiarity about the spirit of the men, he gave no sign of it.

"But now," he took up his tale, "everything's changed. In the old days, some o' the biggest circuses was crooked. Nowadays, nothin' but a few—quite a few—shyster carnivals is. I ain't sayin' they got religion, either. It just pays better in ev'ry way t' go absolutely straight. Meself, I claim, while I was in th' Army and all that, that I come t' look at things different and there's lots o' things I wouldn't do now if the tent show busi-

ness was as crooked as the Rocky Mountains.

"It's that I'm askin' ye t' believe, so help me!"

He appeared to be talking largely to Rex, as if there was some particular understanding between them. Rariden probably considered Rex one sure friend in the flight, at least.

No one said a word for a moment after that plea. Then Kennard cleared his voice.

"No reason why we shouldn't," he proclaimed. "But why should you care whether we do or not?"

"Because," confessed Mr. Buck Rariden with an expansive smile, "I have somethin' up my sleeve t' spring on McMullen."

He hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, spat copiously, and took a wide-legged stance. His eyes sparkled out at them, and he set out forthwith to sell something.

"A few days ago our billin' car come in here, with the press agent it carried aboard t' look over the lay o' the land and get things under way. He writes back that a week from now—in fact, only a day after we're supposed t' show here, they's a combination rodeo, pic-

nic and flyin' circus fur the benefit of a hospital. Am I right?"

"You are. It's an annual occasion," Rex told him.

"Furthermore," he went on, "the thing takes place at the ball grounds, which I understand is quite large and has stands to hold two or three thousand people already. And you build more seats, temporary——"

"Not us. The town. The hospital is a town affair."

"Sure. And quite a lot o' people come in from the country round about fur the holiday, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, what I want t' put over is this."

His huge, bony body was leaning forward now, a horn forefinger tapping against the palm of his hand, his humorous face alive with enthusiasm.

"First, ye might as well know that the show ain't been doin' so well and all contributions is thankfully received. This might be a godsend to us. However, there are other considerations fur us doin' it—what I'm goin' t' sug-

gest, I mean. One is that we're thinkin' serious like of establishin' winter quarters right here in McMullen instid o' San Antone, where we been winterin' the stock an' equipment fur four or five years. And the hay an' meat an' feed bill for the animals alone ain't no small item to a few merchants around the town. I mention this t' show why we'll go a long ways t' git in right with th' town.

"What we want t' do is this. The town's gonna have this big affair t' take in mazuma. We want t' show the town the same day, make a lot more money for 'em than they could make by themselves, let professional showmen increase the gate, make more money fur themselves as well, we hope, but a cinch t' make more fur the hospital."

"How?" Duke Daly asked easily.

Rariden's eyes darted toward him, and the expression in them darkened. Daly was at ease, but it seemed to Rex his face was paler than it had been.

"In the first place, you was goin' to have a rodeo in the afternoon. Have part of that in the mornin', instead, and our troupe o' cowboys an' girls'll compete with your local lights

from ranches. O' course, a certain number of 'em'll lose on purpose so's the local talent can be happy——"

"They may not have to lay down any," Tex MacDowell drawled. "There are a few boys on the King ranch that could jump into your troupe as stars any time they wanted to."

"All the better! Then it can be on the level. It's always good fur the happiness o' the rubes t' have the local talent win. If Ivna Perzitoloca, born Steve Maloney, our wrestler, shouldn't lose every afternoon and night t' a local wrestler the crowd's be kickin' like steers over payin' a quarter fur the afterpiece. As it is, the local boy's a hero, his townspeople are happy as pigs in clover, and Steve don't lose a nickel."

This philosophical discourse got a fleeting smile out of even the Duke.

"Well, then, we have the rodeo in the mornin'. The preliminaries, that is. Then the picnic lunch, and a few hours for the crowd t' sample our midway and the other things ye'll have, o' course. Then, in the afternoon, the finals o' the rodeo, and mebbe some exhibitions by our hands. No afternoon show, far's we're

concerned. You'd have your flyin' circus in the afternoon, too.

"I forgot t' mention that we'd put up our seats, which'll hold more'n five thousand people, in that park o' yours. With permanent, temporary and show seats, it looks to me like there could be put up, inside that fence, enough benches for fifteen thousand people. O' course, that's my estimate, just lookin' at it from th' air——"

"Sure, there could," Kennard agreed with him, "but there aren't more than twenty thousand people in the town, including Chinese. I——"

"Wait till ye see a showman work!" grinned the irrepressible Rariden.

He wiped the sweat from his freckled brow and took off his vest. Rex could see that addressing the mob, as it were, and trying to put over something, was meat and drink to him.

"Now look. Instead o' us chargin' a dollar and a half fur reserved seats and a dollar fur the others, we double that, see? We put up the show without no tent—center poles and riggin' uncovered. We string our lights, and mebbe we can get some searchlights additional.

In addition, the crowd can buy, for four dollars, meanin' a dollar extra to what they'd pay fur seats at the circus alone, admission to mornin', afternoon and evenin' events. The circus, at capacity fur fifteen thousand people, gits say thirty-three or four thousand dollars. The hospital gits all admissions for mornin' and afternoon, whether it's a combined ticket or not. Our boys and girls join in fur nothin'. Out o' the proceeds o' the evenin' show the hospital gits one-third."

He stopped and inserted a new plug of tobacco in his cheek. It bulged out like a goat inside a python. Rex was listening, fascinated by his salesmanship. Sparkling, grinning, his Irish brogue more musical than ever, he certainly did hold attention.

"That," he went on, "is what I call mutually advantageous. In the first place, we win money if we play to a crowd. Our best day's business, even if we sit 'em on the ground inside th' big top, is less'n fifteen thousand dollars at capacity. We get around twenty if we fill that park.

"As fur the hospital, that gits plenty. We put our advance crew, billers, press agints, ban-

ner man, checkers, and all, to work everywhere within sixty miles o' McMullen. Your papers do extra publicity, o' course. Competin' in a rodeo against circus talent'll draw hundreds more people. The circus itself is a big draw. Everything combines, see? It's a holiday in town, just about, except for stores that want t' clean up. You mean t' say that out of a town o' twenty thousand people with a drawin' population o' more'n twenty-five thousand, we cain't raise fifteen thousand for that evenin' show?''

As they looked at one another, wondering, Rex came to the conclusion that Mr. Buck Rariden was exactly correct. In fact, it looked to be a reasonable method of getting the hospital easily double the amount it had ever received from the annual benefit.

''Here come the patrol ships,'' Kennard remarked absently.

He was thinking things over. Two De Havilands, one coming from the east and the other from the west, were growing specks in the sky. Surprising what a relief it was to see them, too! It always was pleasant to have all the ships and flyers snug for the night on the border. If

they weren't home, no one figured they were safe somewhere else. Pilots and observers were assumed to be badly hurt, at least, until proved otherwise. This assumption usually was correct.

As if the hum of the motors had called him forth, a short, burly figure appeared in front of the tents, a few yards west of the line of buildings.

"Is that your pilot?" Rex inquired. "He did a nice piece of flying himself."

"The very same," nodded Rariden. "What d'ye think o' the idea, Rex?"

"Sounds good to me," Lee told him, his eyes on the approaching airman. "Introduce me, somebody. I might as well say my piece and get it over with."

"Name of Oley Johannsen," stated Rariden impatiently.

He turned to his shipmate and bellowed:

"This is Rex Lee, the boy we threw a line to up above, Oley. He's quiv'rin t' tell ye how much he appreciates still havin' his faculties."

Rex shook hands as his eyes met a pair of baby blue ones which gazed vacuously at him. Johannsen's round face was not cherubic; one's

visage must have a bit of expression to register even cherubism. His face was like a lump of smooth dough, and it gathered around his eyes until they were just round blue holes. His bullet head was covered, barely covered, with blond hair cropped so close that the skin shone through. His grip was weak and cool. His eyes might have been made of blue glass, and whatever was behind them looked to be empty.

He nodded his acknowledgement of Rex's halting thanks, sat down, and watched the landing of the De Havilands without saying one solitary word. He had about as much use for speech as a trout has for a Turkish towel.

"The whole idea, if it can be put across, looks like a good bet to me," Kennard said finally, "but why talk to us about it? We have nothing to do with the shindig, except to do some flying to help things on."

"Ye can see how important the thing is t' the show," Rariden explained. "And I know you boys have a lot o' influence in the town. What did I say at th' start? That I wanted ye with me. Ye can see how, if ye went into town and told around that I was a crook, the whole thing'd be spoiled!"

Mr. Oley Johannsen turned his large head slowly. His tongue wet his lips slightly. His round, vacant eyes suddenly held a questioning light in them as they met the Irishman's.

"They got wise t' me bein' in jail, Oley," Rariden told him, biting off his words viciously.

He glanced at Daly, as if to say more, but apparently thought better of it.

"I've laid my cards on the table!" Rariden roared. "Ye've sized me up. Are ye with me or ag'in me?"

"You mean," Duke Daly said in level tones, "whether anybody is going to say anything about your past, and whether or not you are to be watched in all your dealings?"

"Right. Are ye goin' round town tellin' 'em t' not trust the whole Barr-Maxwell Circus because I was in jail before the war?"

He was leaning forward belligerently, daring Daly to say yes. Again that taut, uncomfortable feeling was in the air. Daly must have been a man of iron. His own past sins, inferentially greater because of the vagueness of Rariden's references, had been thrown in his face. He stood before his brother officers, for he was still a reserve officer, branded. And as

far as one could tell, he was scornful of it all and gave not a tinker's damn. The fact that Rex knew better made the ordeal seem more bitter to him.

Kennard got to his feet. The four patrolmen were striding up the line, after stopping to inspect the circus ship.

"In view of what has been said," the C.O. said deliberately, "the way to do it is this. I'll speak in favor of the whole idea, and no personalities will be mentioned. It will simply be a matter of the town taking the ordinary strict business precautions in dealing with strangers. I'll even go so far as constantly to mention that if the matter is brought to me. It will be, because I'm on the committee handling things. Whether or not you were in jail, Rariden, doesn't cut any ice, if your show works straight down here."

"That's the way t' talk."

For some reason, he kept looking at Rex, as if seeking his approval. Rex nodded.

"Sure, Buck. I don't think the boys will shoot off their mouths any."

Of course, every word of that kind of stuff was a reminder of Daly. He had been pulled

down into the mire by Rariden. No one was saying a word, but there were four thoughts about the Duke to one about the showman.

Knowing this, as he must, Rex was sure that his heart was dead within him and his pride beaten down to earth. But he did not show it. He was as upstage as a brand new shavetail.

"That's great! Fine! And what a day for McMullen that'll be!" blared Buck with much exultation.

Rex saw his pilot staring at him, his face expressionless. Then those blank eyes strayed to the Duke. Daly was looking westward. The sun was a ball of fire floating in multi-colored clouds. Above them a fleet of cumulous mists glowed, an indescribable color.

"I'd enjoy a flight right now, Captain," Daly said suddenly. "I'll take a pilot, of course. Haven't flown for three months. How about it? Would you care to go along, Tex?"

"I take over the O.D. in about two minutes, Duke."

"Would you mind going with me, Rex?"

"Not a bit," Rex told him hastily.

He was always deference itself to anybody.

He might have been a thug when he was younger, but he was the kind of gentleman who could carry a cane without looking silly, or push in a lady's chair without being self-conscious.

Rariden took a look at the sky. The wind had died away, and the air was calm and cool. It was the ideal time of day to fly.

"How about it, me bonny Scotch chauffeur?" he asked boisterously. "I enjoy a bit of playin' about meself."

Johannsen shrugged his heavy sholders.

"If you vant to," he said tonelessly.

"Your enthusiasm," Rex told him, "reminds me of a crocodile's exuberant disposition. Come on, Duke."

They got their flying clothes. Rex started to say a word or two of comfort and cheer to the silent Daly, but Duke's reserve kept him from it. He was hard to get close to. Rex wouldn't have called him "old man" any quicker than he'd have chucked Queen Victoria under the chin.

When they got to the line the circus ship was already warming up.

"Pretty fair ship for a show," Rex re-

marked. "That stubby two seater'll do one-thirty-five with that Liberty in it."

As if to prove him correct, Johannsen took it off from the line, the narrow way of the field. It zoomed, right off the ground, like a fish skimming up the side of a wave.

"That Johannsen is an excellent pilot, too," Daly observed in his precise manner.

"Old Rariden is sure a card," Rex said finally. "Crude, but I'll swear I can't help liking the sucker. Too bad you and he had a run in."

Daly's eyes did not show his thoughts. They were the eyes of an old man, but there was no pain in them.

"What's the difference?" he asked quietly, and that closed the discussion as a pail of water would douse a burning match.

A moment later Rex had the stick of the ton and a half De Haviland pressed forward and was shoving the throttle all the way on. They raced across the airdrome. Their take-off compared to the Brewster's, was that of an overfed duck's alongside a humming bird.

The other ship was playing around a cloud, two thousand feet high. Rex made for them,

for no particular reason. They got fairly close to them, and Rex gave Duke the controls. He started handling the ship, and he had himself a time. They skirted the edges of opaque clouds as if curving around cliffs. He dived for a cloud, and then zoomed mightily up the side of it, playing that he'd avoided a collision. He roared down cañons of fleecy mist, and climbed mountains of it. Rex glanced around a couple of times, and the blaze in his eyes seemed to be melting the goggles. The Duke surely loved the air.

Rex scarcely noticed where they were. He sat back and enjoyed himself.

Finally they got over a covey of big clouds. The earth was hidden, except for a few small holes in the mist here and there. With the sun going down, the sky was like a reversed vision of the Grand Canyon of Colorado. Golden spires, crimson mountains, shadowed valleys and pink pastures—all were there.

Rex did not think himself æsthetic, but it got to him. It was awe-inspiring. Daly was so thrilled by it that Rex could see he was unconscious of anything but sheer beauty.

For a moment they both reveled in the beauty

of nature. Then, without any warning whatever, there came a shattering crash. In a split second the sturdy roar of the twelve-cylinder Liberty had risen to an anguished scream. It was racing itself to pieces. As Rex's hand darted for the throttle, something hit him a glancing blow on the head. His helmet flopped loose, and blood gushed down the side of his face.

The propeller had disintegrated, and a piece of it had hit him.

The Duke was already spiraling down. Below, through the one small opening which was within sight, Rex could see that the ground was a solid green mesquite.

With something of surprise, Rex noted that the circus ship was right behind them, following them down. They had seen the propeller break, and were going to see what happened.

Rex shook the stick, and took the ship. That was no time for a flyer who'd laid off the air for three months to get back into practice. If what Rex feared was the truth, what lay ahead was about as simple as going forty miles an hour through Times Square would be.

As they burst through the clouds his worst

fears were realized. They were about eighteen hundred feet high, and they had drifted out over solid chaparral. The nearest fields, close to the banks of the Rio Grande, were twelve or fifteen miles away.

The Liberty was cut dead, of course. Back of Rex, Daly was as cool as New Year's in Newfoundland.

The problem ahead was so simple there was no problem. A man in front of a firing squad has no heed for deep cogitation. What lay ahead of them was to collide with a few mesquite trees, aboard of a ton and a half of airplane, at close to seventy miles an hour.

Rex's little prayer to the flyers' gods was the one that pilots have sent on high since the beginning of flying.

"Don't cripple me too badly; bump me off if you can't leave me reasonably whole."

Such minor appendages as teeth, expendable bones, et cetera, had already been stripped from him. Anything else he lost would come under the head of a necessity.

As always in a case like that, he was too contained to be afraid.

He was gliding southeastward, to get as close

to help as possible. Three hundred feet, two hundred, fifty. Now they were losing speed rapidly, just skimming the mesquite.

Rex was lucky, in a way. Ten feet ahead was a thick clump of gnarled trees. He heaved back on the stick. The nose came up feebly—the last dying gasp of the ship. He flipped the right wing down. For a split second they hung there. He tore the goggles from his eyes, left his arm around his head, and relaxed as the right wing crashed down through the foliage.

The snapping of branches, tearing of linen, breaking of struts and spars fairly broke their eardrums. It seemed that a million sharp fingers were tearing at Rex. His clothes were ripped, his body and face a mass of blood. Then there came quiet as his head hit the ground and nearly broke his neck. Something came down over him and, as his belt broke, it seemed that it had carried his stomach away with it.

## CHAPTER IV

### EXPLANATIONS

He was alive and, as he tore at the wreckage, Rex knew that few, if any, bones were broken.

"Duke!" he yelled.

"Here!" came a weak voice, and simultaneously two heads poked themselves through the débris. The blood showered down as they shook themselves free of linen, and splinters of wood rained upon the wreckage below them.

"Glad to see you again," Rex said, wiping the gore from his eyes with one hand and shaking hands with the other.

"You're looking well," smiled the Duke.

For some reason, they didn't move. They just swayed, like two reeds sticking out of a lake.

Rex looked upward toward the circus ship. It was swooping down over them. Rariden had his neck about a yard out of the front seat. Rex waved to him and pointed back toward

McMullen, which was only fifteen or twenty miles away. There were fields within three or four miles, down by the river, and D.H.'s could pick them up if they hurried. It would be dark within an hour. Rariden and his loquacious pilot apparently understood, for the ship sped eastward, just over the mesquite.

"Some wreck to survive," Rex stated, feeling better as his head cleared. "See what happened? The motor hit a tree, and so did the tail. The fuselage snapped right between the two cockpits."

"You're lucky the motor didn't bounce back on you," Daly said calmly.

"As a matter of fact," Rex told him, "my big toe abuts right on a cylinder head this minute."

In the midst of the crash they were like a couple of masts from a shipwreck.

"You seem absent-minded," Rex remarked. "Worried about Europe or something?"

His levity didn't get a foot. Daly's eyes were gazing abstractedly into the distance.

"I was just thinking about that propeller," he said finally, as if remarking about the cli-

mate. "It certainly did break all of a sudden, didn't it?"

"Sure did."

"There wasn't any vibration to warn us either, was there? No hint of its being unbalanced?"

"Nary one. It just became sawdust pronto."

"Which isn't very common, if I remember correctly."

"No, it isn't."

"Did you happen to notice where the Brewster was just before that?"

"Say!" Rex exploded. "What are you driving at? I know you're a full-fledged Sherlock Holmes, but——"

"I was just wondering," he said quietly, dragging on his cigarette. He held it with his little finger out, as if it was a cup of tea being imbibed in a drawing-room.

"Suppose," he went on in that carefully enunciated speech of his, "that Mr. Buckley Rariden was not at all pleased with the presence of a fellow who knew a lot about him. And suppose——"

"But everybody in the flight knows about him now," Rex said in a highly bewildered

manner. "Getting rid of you—and how in the name of goodness are you blaming him for it? Can't you——"

"Suppose, anyhow, that he was afraid that my knowledge, plus our little feud, would work against him in matters of importance. And then we'll say that he gets his ship close to us, when we are over deadly country, and he draws a gun. He is a good shot. He takes careful aim from behind, and shoots into our propeller so that we'll have to crack up in the mesquite——"

"And a couple of corpses a likelihood!" Rex exploded. "After all, that's so simple I might have thought of it myself."

They were silent for a minute, as Rex turned it over in his mind. He was stunned.

"Duke, it was right funny about that prop, and it could have happened as you say," he said finally, "but listen. The whole wad was shot this afternoon. If he got rid of you, the rest of us knew that he'd been a jailbird. You know that. So what good would it do him?"

"He might figure that his frank speech had got you all on his side. He and I had a little public tiff. He doesn't care for me so much, I

imagine. I didn't act very much impressed, possibly. He might think that I woud be working continually to interfere with his plans. Whereas you have capitulated to him, it might be that I could eventually work from within to undermine him, see?"

"Then it comes down to the fact that you think it possible that he would deliberately try to kill you and me for revenge on you and to make his plans a success?" Rex asked him point-blank.

"In view of what happened, I think it a possibility, yes," Daly answered imperturbably. "His sudden desire to do more flying this afternoon was rather unusual, too. I may be wrong, but I may not be, in which case——"

"You've got to figure his plans as important, and crooked!" Lee finished for him.

Daily nodded, those remarkable gray eyes resting on him with a luminous glow in them.

"I'll admit that prop thing was strange, but it could happen," Rex said flatly, "and I'll be darned if I think that big Irishman would set out to murder you and me this afternoon!"

"Let's talk as we walk," Daly suggested evenly.

They started south, and he continued:

"That would depend on two things. One is whether he's the type of Irishman who can get into murderous rages when his vanity is hurt. The other is how important his plans at McMullen are."

"Listen, Duke," Rex said very slowly. "Have you shot the works about Rariden? Do we all know all you know about him? Did his story cover the ground thoroughly?"

"In a way, yes; but you'd have to know that old carnival outfit he was with—or any one like it—to appreciate what I say. An outlaw aggregation, composed of the roughest, toughest men you ever saw. Wandering Bedouins, with every man's hand against them, and always getting away with murder in the enemy's territory, so to speak. By that I mean that they were always a little group, taking chances in a tough town.

"Did you ever see a 'hey, rube'? Well, that would show what I mean. Any one of those boys, all rules of fair fighting forgotten, could cripple and kill a dozen townsmen and do it quickly. Talk about hard-boiled eggs! In that outfit Buck had to maintain his own authority

by right of might. He not only fought alongside his thugs, but fought them too, if necessary. He handled a drunken, roistering, crooked, tough-bitten crew of grifters, dips, hoboes and showmen as well as any tough mobs from outside that came their way."

"Some education might be got from a school like that," Rex nodded.

"You can't figure that delicate repugnance for coarse methods would be a characteristic of the star pupil, could you?"

"Might figure that he'd shy at murder."

"Sure, but not necessarily."

Rex was bound to admit that. Nevertheless, he was uneasy and sore and scared. Probably it was because Buck Rariden had saved his life. But it was more than that. There was something boyish in the big, homely, mocking Irishman which he liked tremendously. He seemed like a playboy. Magnetism and all the rest of it were in him and Rex liked him.

"Probably I'm cuckoo, but I can't believe it!" he told Daly.

"Haven't learned yet never to give anybody the best of it, have you?"

Suddenly Rex was aware of something. During that whole conversation Daly had treated

the proposition of a double murder as not at all remarkable; in fact, as a matter of course. He had discussed it as coolly, with as little appreciation of the fact that it might be a bit out of the ordinary, as Rex would have discussed the possibility of a poor propeller's having been shipped them by accident.

"He certainly is hard!" Rex thought to himself. He looked sidewise at that boyish face. "Pro gambling was light parlor diversion for this hombre, I guess."

They plodded along silently. Rex was trying desperately to do a little unprejudiced thinking. Finally he succeeded.

"Listen, Duke," he burst forth. "I'm not a complete and total fool, of course. And I realize that what you say has some foundation, and that it's a possibility. In fact, that we ought to act, from now on, as though it was a proved fact that Buck Rariden and his pilot are murderers. That means that they're up to something. Reading from left to right, that means that the festive flyers and the trusting townspeople ought to do something about it."

"Without doing any injustice to the showmen," nodded Daly, "until my dime novel deliberations are proved true."

"Just have everybody on their guard at all times, huh?"

"I'd go even further. He seems to think a lot of you. I've often noticed that when one man does a great favor for another, the recipient often thinks less of his benefactor, through an inferiority complex or something——"

"Whereas the guy that helped the other likes him more."

"Exactly. The other one has helped fatten his ego."

"Buck must love me," Rex stated. "He wanted to get me heaven bound via airship, mesquite and fire."

"You wouldn't stand in the way of his own welfare, perhaps," Dally suggested. "Anyhow, I was thinking of this. In the dim event that he tried to bump us off, he was after me. If he was after me, it was because he has plans which will brook no interference. If that's the case, they probably concern his show and its appearance here. Maybe the show just plans to work strong during their day here, and clean up plenty. I——"

"Or, granting that you're right, he sees so much profit here—legitimate profit—that he

doesn't want to be interfered with by anyone."

"Perhaps. Plus a suddenly generated hatred for me, that might spell a sudden impulse to get rid of me when there was no chance for detection. He's Irish, with the temper of a devil. Anyhow, from all angles, I think it would be a good thing if you cultivated him, and finally, on the plea of a vacation and that sort of thing, asked him to let you go back to the show with him and spend a few days. Then you could look over the lay of the land, see?"

Tired and weak as Rex was, he did capers through the chaparral.

"That has signs of genius," he approved. "It'll be a whale of a lot of fun for me, any way you take it."

"And if he refuses, it will be almost an admission that the show has something to hide," Daly went on with calm logic.

"Exactly. And say, Duke, I didn't see any guns on either one of 'em when they took off."

"Neither did I. But they might have had one in the ship, or got one when we weren't looking or something. You think I'm crazy, Rex. Perhaps I am. The chances are ten to one I'm wrong. But you don't know the type, and I do!"

## CHAPTER V

### COUNT FRIEDERICH VON STERNBERG

An hour later they landed at the airdrome with the aid of the night lights, and shortly thereafter they were enjoying a slight collation in the company of the rest of the flight. As guests, they had Messrs. Buck Rariden and Oley Johannsen. Furthermore, it had been found out, through exhaustive research on the part of several members of the flight, that no guns had been observed upon the bodies and persons of either one of the showmen; that no gun had been in the ship as far as the mechanics had noticed; that both men owned Colts, which were then reposing in the tents to which they had been temporarily assigned, and that both guns were fully loaded and, if fired recently, had been thoroughly cleaned. Mr. Oley Johannsen's gun showed signs of recent cleaning.

That, of course, made little difference. Who-

ever had fired the shot, if any, was a minor detail. And either or both could have had guns beneath their clothing. In fact, they would almost surely have concealed them.

Furthermore, the trusty master sergeant had stated without equivocation that the propeller had been almost new, had been tested for balance and inspected enthusiastically but a few days before. It was about as liable to explode with a loud report in mid-air as a four-ton truck would be tc turn turtle because it ran over a piece of string.

Which left matters high up in the air.

Both men were entirely lacking in self-consciousness. Buck was as humorous and peppy as ever, except when he looked at Daly; and Deadpan Oley was himself. The events of the day had put Buck into high good humor, which he gave vent to boisterously. It seemed that he had a couple of friends named Pat and Mike, who had had myriad adventures which he rehashed with gusto. Some of their circus experiences were well worth repeating. Even Duke Daly laughed.

The Duke had entered the dining hall without giving a sign of embarrassment. The boys

couldn't help showing that his presence was a sort of wet blanket, because they were so keenly aware of his humiliation that it was hard to be natural. He acted as if daring them to say a word, even think a thought, about him. That public appearance must have been an ordeal, more so for him than the average man. He sat next to Tex, and not even MacDowell could be himself until Rariden's tales had broken the ice a little bit.

There had come a lull in Rariden's chatter when the entire table became paralyzed with astonishment. Oley Johannsen, out of a clear sky, gave utterance to speech. No one had coxed or urged him. It was his own original idea.

"I think I like to go to the jail and see the robbers," he declared calmly.

"Say, so would I!" proclaimed Rariden. "Those boys had their nerve with 'em. Oley is gonna fly back to th' show to-morrow. I'll be around a couple o' days or more t' git things fixed up. Cap, d'ye think it might be arranged with the sheriff t' take a look at 'em to-night?"

"Sure. Which reminds me, now that Penoch is here, there's been so much low and lofty

conversation that it slipped my mind. I wonder—the airplane and all—whether the Von Sternberg bunch had anything to do with that holdup?"

"Sounds like 'em!" boomed Penoch. "I'd say it was a cinch if he wasn't in jail himself, or in the jail hospital, that is."

"By the way," Daly slid in smoothly, "I'd like to hear what you know about this Von Sternberg and his gang, O'Reilly."

"Me too!" declared Rariden. "I remember the name——"

"You ought to! He's the bozo that came darn near to stealing the biggest dirigible in the world right from under the noses of its crew and twenty thousand people!" roared O'Reilly. "*The America* is the ship and El Paso the town, where he's now sick in jail."

"Sure!" agreed Rariden. "I didn't see the papers fur two or three days after it happened, so I didn't know the whole of it."

"You think the holdup might have been pulled by part of his gang?" Daly questioned O'Reilly.

Suddenly Rex remembered that Daly had been told that he might have to go into Mexico

to investigate that same outfit. It was a new idea to Rex, connecting the holdup with Von Sternberg. The use of a plane made it seem possible, at that.

"Sure," stated O'Reilly.

He leaned back in his chair. He was just about five feet tall, but his body was powerful—broad shouldered, straight legged, and hard as rock. Above it his face was round and smooth and firm, decorated with a tiny, cocky little mustache waxed to points sharp enough to spear a turtle on the wing. It had been bleached blond by the sun, as had his eyebrows, which shaded a pair of just about the most remarkable brown eyes a man ever owned. His whole being radiated vitality, but those eyes were leaping pools of reckless life. They glowed and sparkled and burned, as if shooting forth sparks of excess energy. His hair was a color all its own.

It was the most forthright, unashamed and shrieking red Rex had ever seen. He parted it in the center and brushed it smoothly. That made his face seem as square as a die, and threw into relief his powerful jaw. The fact

that his countenance was tanned to mahogany, and that those eyebrows and the tiny mustache were blond, made it truly startling. There was something pixielike and elfin about it, as if every spike of hair was bristling with life.

He adventured all over the world without losing his irrepressible love of life, and he could take care of himself in a more versatile manner than most of the men Rex had known. His exploits in the Air Service, from France to the Philippines, were famous. He'd been court-martialed dozens of times, orders being a small thing when they ran counter to his personal plans.

To top off the contradictions in the granite-like little squirt, the voice, usually with a laugh in it, which arose from that miniature body was a deep bass.

"Well," he said, "I got to know Von Sternberg when we were both instructors in the Mexican Air Service. Later he went bad, and now, as near as we can find out, he runs a big aërial smuggling gang. He's got guts, a sense of humor, and a big head. The kind of a bozo that would like to be a Robin Hood or

something. Fly over and drop a note to this flight, say, informing them that he'd put something over the night before.

"We first ran into him—I may say that he and I have a personal feud, so he picks on this section of the border—on a smuggling deal. We nabbed two pretty high-class aids of his on that, but he escaped. Then I'm darned if he don't send one of his men in here to visit this flight, as a sort of preparation for a big deal. We killed him off, a little later, when he joined with Von Sternberg and others to try to swipe the dirigible *America* while she was moored at El Paso."

Rariden's laugh rang from the rafters. Daly, his face impassive, was listening without moving a muscle.

"What a broth of a boy!" Buck chuckled.

"The size of it seems to be," Kennard cut in, "that he's gathered a considerable group of aids together who worship him and he's become an aërial bandit. He must be popular down there with the peons, because he's never caught. And he raids the borber by habit so to speak.

"Von Sternberg's just the kind that would

foment a revolution and aim to be secretary of war or something when it was over," Penoch interrupted. "He's just making this border—or was—as troublesome as possible. Smuggling, kidnaping, raiding, all by airplane. Now, of course, he's in the hospital at El Paso, and things have been very quiet."

"You put him there when you kiboshed his stealin' the balloon, eh?" interjected Rariden.

"Uh-huh."

"There's another string to his bow, too," Captain Kennard told Daly. "It seems that he went into the oil business in Mexico just after Penoch left the Mexican Air Service flat. He wasn't any too particular about his methods, and got the big companies down on him. As a result, when he finally struck oil and had a fortune in his grasp, they put the screws on him. Wouldn't buy his oil, or pump it for him, see? So Von Sternberg just starts in to get back at them by robbing their pay rolls when they sent them down through the fields. He had a gang of several dozen men, and probably hundreds of others who were sympathetic with him. He forced the big companies into sending their pay rolls by air. Right now, or

before we got him, he was going into the business of robbing the aërial pay cars."

"The situation, then," Daly said in his precise way, "is that he was a natural leader, with a small army of his own, just raising the deuce down in Mexico and along the border without being interferred with."

"Exactly," nodded Penoch. "Von Sternberg became a very popular man with the rank and file of peons. He added to that popularity deliberately. His exploits are sort of sagas down there. No Mexican probably would turn him in or help capture him. The government seems helpless. Of course, Mexico City may be anxious to get him, we'll say, but the local officials may try to nab him with their tongues in their cheeks."

Johannsen was listening, round eyed and silent. He hung on every word, and Rex thought that the picture of this superbandit had actually kindled a flame of interest within him.

"What sort of a looking bird is he?" Daly inquired evenly.

"About six feet two, good-looking in a blond, strong way, powerful as an ox, a great smile,

as crooked as a horse's hind leg and out for the good of No. 1," Penoch answered.

"You and he have a private feud, you said?"

"Uh-huh. And he got me in a shape where I was about ready to leave the border for my health, too. It started over a girl, sister of a friend of mine. I'd love to choke him to death for it, and tried to.

"Then it so happened that I got into a mess with a rebel general down there, and he was killed when I escaped. He was more or less of an idol with several thousand of his followers. If they knew who killed their boss one or two of 'em, at least, would trail me to Singapore to bump me off. Von Sternberg knows I was in the gang. Just before we got him he tried, through this Englishman, to force me to join his gang to keep him from setting a few bloodthirsty spigs on my trail. That's the way, I think, that he got most of his leading lieutenants, renegade flyers, and so forth. By blackmailing them, I mean, even if he had to frame 'em first."

"I see," nodded the Duke. "The question is, whether his gang will continue to operate without their leader."

"A boy like that," chuckled Rariden, "should have some other spalpeens in his crowd that would be capable of takin' the lead. Ye really think that maybe some of his men had somethin' t' do with the train robbery?"

"Who can tell?" Penoch shrugged. "The airplane feature of it would almost make it seem as though there was a possibility, wouldn't it?"

"As ye say, who can tell?" repeated Rariden as he got to his feet. "Well, who's goin' down t' see the prisoners with Oley and me? Ye'll call the sheriff, Captain?"

"Sure will."

Jimmy Jennings and Jack Beaman decided to go along and take a look at the bandits. The rest of them adjourned to the recreation room. There was a complete representation of the flyers, except for Beaman and Jennings. They were just about to scatter into bridge when Duke Daly, leaning against the mantelpiece, said suddenly:

"There's something I'd like to settle with the flight."

Rex looked up quickly. He felt the timbre of Duke's voice. He saw Tex sidle over toward

the Duke, as if he too sensed something. The flyers stopped whatever they were doing, and every eye was trained on the slim, blonde chap whose eyes were narrowed as if to hide what was in them. His face was in the shadow, so all that Rex could see was its clean-cut features, without any expression whatsoever.

Then Daly started to talk, calmly, and very, very coldly.

"Rariden, this afternoon, said bluntly that I had no right to talk about him or anyone else," Daly said, "because I was once a bum who didn't amount to anything. He is absolutely correct."

"Oh, shut up, for heaven's sake!" Tex told him gruffly.

Daly never so much as turned an eye on Tex. He was looking at the others, his gaze shifting coolly from face to face. Rex got just a glimpse of the terrible suffering in his eyes, and it made him crawl to think of what was going on behind that cold exterior.

"I'm simply telling you, so that no one will be under any misapprehension," Daly went on. "I don't care to stick around without an invitation. The facts of the matter are these. I

ran away from home when I was fifteen, and for several years, as a starving hobo and other things, I was, in a manner of speaking, a part of the underworld. Finally, when I was at the end of my rope, a professional gambler picked me up and made me his partner. For months we played together.

"After that, I was on the race track, and other things—honest, even from the world's point of view. It's true that I've been a professional gambler, but I've never been a crooked one. And I'm not calling for a show-down now."

His eyes were flashing from face to face with disdain—but there was heartbreak in them, too.

"I'm turning in. The question is whether I shall continue to live out here at the airdrome or not. We may have to coöperate on business affairs, of course. I would rather live here. But it doesn't make any difference. I don't want to contaminate anybody.

"Talk it over, and Tex can tell me whether I'm invited or not. And don't strain yourselves or try to be nice. Night, everybody."

Outwardly composed, a sort of statue of ice

walked out the door. And Rex was glad he had. It had been almost unbearable to see him going through that ordeal—all the more so because his iron control was such that one sensed his emotions rather than saw them.

No sooner had his footsteps ceased to resound from the porch than Tex MacDowell, his eyes a pair of coals in his head, was laying down the law.

"Before anybody says a word," he burst forth, "let me say something. I've known all this, and a lot more, from Duke's own mouth for years. I know this, too. He's peculiar, because he's built up a shell around himself. During his starving years, kicked around and debarred from the kind of society he was born for, he sort of lived an inner life all his own. Now that he's up in the world, he's the most cynical, hard-boiled egg I ever saw. He can't forget the time when nobody had a good word for him.

"For that reason, some of the boys never did cotton to him when he was an active flyer. Couldn't place him. Thought he was superior and conceited. It all came down to his being sensitive; get me?

"Now here's what I started in to say. Kennard knows it as well as I do, but we're the only ones. When he was a flyer and he and I went down to collect dope on what we thought was a bandit's rendezvous, disguised, we ran into that same old gambler, named Young, who'd picked the Duke up as a kid and taught him to gamble.

"At that time Daly's father and mother were alive, and he was heart and soul a flyer. We got the dope, and then this bird Young simply put it up to the Duke. He admitted everything, but said that if the Duke didn't keep hands off, that he, Young, would spill all he knew. That would mean Duke's public disgrace, cashiered from the Army, and probably the death of his old parents in Louisville.

"Know what kind of a border patrolman, officer, gentleman, or whatever you want, Daly was? He told me all about it, and told Young and his gang to do their worst. In other words, he risked ruin to do his duty, and it was only the luck that killed Young which kept Daly's disgrace from being published all over the country.

"Am I right, Cap?"

"Sure!" rasped the captain. "Anybody in this gang that doesn't feel as though he could treat the Duke right——?"

"Christopher Colombo!" roared Penoch O'Reilly. "Are we being kidded? What do you think we are—babies? I never saw so much——"

"Listen, squirt," MacDowell cut in gently. "I know how you feel. But you don't understand Daly. When anybody's nice to him, he wonders what they're after. He figures that if he wasn't in the position he is, no one would have any use for him. He figures that if his supposed friends knew his past, he'd me kicked off their front stoops. All that sort of thing. And he hates himself more or less, although he isn't ashamed of what he did because it was a necessity at the time.

"Consequently, my boy, it becomes a very delicate matter. The point is not to avoid the subject, or to treat him especially nice. Just normally. In fact, if anybody here could be trusted to kid about his past in just the right way, it would be a godsend. Being too considerate would ruin Daly much more certainly than being cool to him. Coolness he'd fight

back—just another tough break to be forgotten as far as he was concerned. See his position? He, of a good family and with every right instinct in the world, made a mistake, and he's paying for it for the rest of his life, he figures, by either being barred from his own kind or getting by with them by deceiving them about his past."

"The proper caper," Kennard suggested, "is for us all to act as though we were saying, 'Sure, we know you were a gambler. What the deuce? You're a good guy now, so forget it. We aren't angels ourselves.' "

"Exactly!" nodded Sleepy Spears.

"That was a grandstand play of his," observed fat little Dumpy Scarth, who, even under these circumstances, couldn't quite forgive another man's holding the center of the stage.

"No, it wasn't," Tex corrected him. "For the ordinary man, maybe yes. It would have been a plea for sympathy. That wasn't the way Duke meant it. He meant it like this. He was saying, 'Here are my cards on the table and you can do as you please about 'em.' "

"But not enjoying showing his hand," Rex remarked.

"Nary a bit," boomed Penoch O'Reilly. "Oh, well, that's that. I understand how he feels."

Gradually the tenor of the conversation changed to Rariden, and finally Captain Kennard said:

"If you're going to cultivate Buck and travel with that show for a few days, you should have gone down to the jail with him, Rex."

"I suppose I should, but this has been a tough day for me," Lee informed the C.O. "I can tag him around to-morrow and next day. I don't think there'll be any trouble."

"If there is, it'll make your suspicions seem somewhat more reasonable," Kennard stated. "Well, I'm going over to the office and sign two thousand more of these reports. If we had half as many men in the field as we've got reading reports in Washington, our standing army would make the armies of all Europe look like a Boy Scout troop."

Tex wandered away—in search of the Duke, Rex imagined—and he settled down to a few

quiet hands of bridge with Sleepy Spears, Penoch O'Reilly and big George Hickman.

Suddenly Captain Kennard appeared in the doorway. He clumped into the room noisily, and his prominent gray eyes were like headlights in his square, battered countenance.

Rex took one look at him and laid down his cards.

"What's the news, Cap?" he asked.

The captain sank down in a chair, and fished a radiogram from his pocket.

"Hold everything," he said. "Count Friederich von Sternberg got away clean about three-quarters of an hour ago, and is free as air in Mexico this minute!"

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF OLEY JOHANNSEN

"WHAT?"

It was a roar which would make the squawk of the bull of Bashan seem the tweet of a canary bird, and it burst from the lips of Penoch O'Reilly. The little fellow was on his feet as if he had been bounced from his chair. In a trice he was planted firmly, short legs wide apart, braced for any shock.

The rest of them were open mouthed.

"He must have been shamming sickness, eh?" Rex managed to articulate none too clearly.

"Evidently," barked Kennard. "It was done like this. Two big cars came driving up to the hospital at Fort Bliss. A couple of bozoes in Army uniforms, one a major and the other a captain, came in and demanded to see Von Sternberg. Claimed to be from Washing-

ton, the way I got it over the long distance phone. I called up after the radiogram.

"Anyway, they went in to see him. He was supposed to be unable to walk on one leg at all. They overcame the orderly without a sound, and lowered Von Sternberg out the window. In a few seconds the two cars were headed for El Paso.

"Each car had machine guns in it—two apiece, evidently. Anyway, they sprayed these machine guns in the air, front and back, at the last end of the trip through El Paso, when the police were trying to stop 'em. Naturally, not even a hundred men at once are going to line up across a road with machine guns pointed at 'em—and nobody's going to pursue a car very closely when it has a machine gun covering the rear.

"They had everything figured out, of course. The two cars were found three miles west of El Paso, along the river, by airplanes. The planes got there just too late. The gang had disappeared. Must have had airplanes planted on the edge of the river, because there wasn't a one of the outlaws in sight and the flyers

were on the job within ten minutes, at the outside, of the time when the cars could have been abandoned."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" breathed O'Reilly, and suddenly that square face of his had aged ten years. "We've got to get that bozo, Cap! Not only because he can ruin me, but gosh!—this border'll be tough as long as he operates."

"And what a gang of men he must have with him!" Kennard said dreamily. "Guts and brains and——"

"A blind worship for their chief," Rex finished up for him.

"Well," stated George Hickman, "this Englishman St. John that turned out to be one of his right bowers was sure no slouch."

Kennard was pacing up and down the room with short, choppy strides.

"An organization that can steal an important prisoner right out from under the noses of the Army is sure going to be no picnic for a few De Havilands," he said, half to himself. "Say, Daly would be interested in this. If he has any idea of going down into Mexico and investigating this bird at first hand——"

"What's the excitement?" came a familiar voice, and Buck Rariden strode in at the head of the quartet of jail visitors.

He had added to his costume of vest, overalls and blue shirt, a felt hat which had evidently been bought during the Spanish-American War and had been sat on almost continuously since that time.

When the bunch heard the news they took it in divers fashions. The flyers, realizing that combat lay ahead, cursed feelingly. Oley Johannsen's vacuous blue eyes lighted up dimly, and his lips moved without any words coming. Buck Rariden threw back his head, and a wave of hilarity washed out of his mouth and over the others. Before they knew it they were grinning.

"What a broth of a boy!" he gasped finally. "Saints preserve us! I ain't laughin' at ye, boys, honest I ain't. But just thinkin' o' that big bozo, runnin' around stealin' dirigibles, escapin' when four regiments are watchin' him, an' runnin' his section o' Mexico as he darned plazes—sure an' it's enough to make me tip me hat to 'im with respict, even though I was shootin' him at the moment!"

Daly came in, followed by Tex. Jimmy Jennings had slipped out to get him. The contained ex-gambler asked about four terse questions. Perhaps years of training under as great an investigator as Graves had helped make him that competent and incisive, but certain it was that Rex felt a sort of confidence in him. If any man could beat Von Sternberg he could.

"It looks to me," he said finally, "as though what is in Graves' mind is the only way out. Von Sternberg has been raising the deuce with American oil men. I guess——"

He stopped talking, probably due to the presence of the circus men. Rex knew what was on his mind, though, and when the Duke and Penoch O'Reilly got together in a corner he was certain of it. For weeks before the capture of the outlaw, Penoch had been wild to conduct a personal expedition into Mexico and fight it out with his ancient enemy right in his own stronghold. Penoch was much worried over what would happen to him if Von Sternberg talked. He figured a knife would be addressed to his back within a day after certain

Mexicans knew more about the killing of their general.

Before the conversation was over Rex had casually broached the subject of a few days with the circus.

"I'm going to take a leave and rest up, especially now that old Von is on the loose again," Lee stated. "How about me going back with you, old-timer, and seeing circus life for a few days? I'll drive stakes or anything."

"Sure!"

It was as hearty and whole-souled a consent as one would care to hear. Every airman's eye had been on the big Irishman when Rex had asked the question—and if he had anything to hide, Buck Rariden was an actor who would make Edwin Booth the leading man of the Squeedunk Firemen's annual entertainment.

"It'll be great fur the show, too!" enthused Rariden. "See? The publicity'll be out, an' reporters'll interview ye, an' ye can tell 'em what a great guy I am, an' what I did, an' the rest of it.

"Oley, don't let me fergit t' send a note by you t' the Old Man when ye go to-morrow.

Rex, ye'll wait two or three days fur me t' git through here, eh? Sure. Maybe we can fly up, huh? Have two ships with the show. It'll be great publicity."

He went on enthusiastically, while Deadpan Oley registered no interest whatever. He seemed to be rolling the subject of Von Sternberg under his tongue.

Rex staggered into bed a little later. He was so tired that during the last half of the journey down the boardwalk he felt as though he was walking in his sleep. He came near lying on the floor because it took effort to climb into bed.

He slept until eleven o'clock in the morning. The captain, in view of the events of the previous day, allowed him to miss the sweet strains of reveille.

He partook of lunch with the gang, Sing Hi, the flight's Chink, deigning to fix him some scrambled eggs as a special favor.

He managed to raise his heavy eyelids high enough to take observations about the board.

"Where are our goggled-eyed guests, the ornaments of the Barr-Maxwell Circus?" he inquired.

"Buck Rariden is galloping over the town of

McMullen, high, wide and handsome," chuckled Kennard. "By the way, seen the morning papers?"

"No."

"Well, the holdup and your little adventure is spread all over the front page, of course," Rex was informed. "That makes Buck Rariden one of the biggest men in town. He's got everybody from the mayor to the Rotary Club dizzy."

"Did anybody give them any advance info on the peculiar coincidence of a broken propeller without any visible reason therefore?" Rex inquired oratorically.

"No," answered Kennard. "I did put a flea in a few ears about watching their steps and not letting any show business slickers take advantage of them, but that's all. Really wasn't justified in anything else. They'll be watched, though."

"I happened to go with Buck to Mayor Sam's sanctum," drawled MacDowell," and his proposition seems on the up and up. The town is to sell the season tickets, as it were—I mean the tickets admitting to everything—and the circus itself will only handle the cash that's taken in for the night show individually."

"The show is trusting the honesty of the townspeople then, rather than vice versa," commented Daly. "That sounds on the level."

"Sure. Of course, the business men'll look at things with a very sharp eye, and be on their guard. After all, that's all that's necessary at this time," Kennard said. "Rariden might be a crook, but still go into the project on the level. It's a good proposition without any dirty work. He may also be a murderer, as you and Rex suspect, but as long as he didn't get away with you he'll be forced to go straight on the deal. Somehow or other, that nick, I believe——"

"Here I come, laughin' and scratchin'!" came a voice from the doorway.

"How's tricks?" asked Jimmy Jennings, and the twinkling eyed, horse-faced Irishman beamed over the table as he replied:

"Great. I got this town right by the left ear. They're fallin' fur Buck Rariden, showman, hero and all-around promoter, until they're tryin' to kiss me. We might be startin' tomorrow, Rex. It's gettin' along fast I am, and no mistake. And why not?" he asked us individually and collectively. "One of the smartest propositions ever put up to a bunch o'

suckers! Barr-Maxwell'll come in here and show this town a day they'll be rememberin' of fur years t' come. Every cripple on his bed o' pain'll have an extra dose o' medicine, the nurses'll be prettier and more of 'em—it's philanthropists we are, and no mistake!

"Did Oley wire from Donovan Field?"

"Haven't heard a word," Pop Cravath told him.

"Huh? Shouldn't take him more'n three hours, even by the railroad, should it?"

"No. Scarcely that."

"And he started at seven thirty by the clock!"

Rariden ran his hands through that sandy hair, and gazed at his plate moodily.

"And now it's twelve-thirty. If the show loses that eighteen-thousand-dollar ship in a crack up, it's tough it'll be. Begad, I'm gonna call up the field."

"He was supposed to wire, was he?" Rex asked.

"Sure. The show's playin' Seguin, but he was to stop fur gas at Donovan, and wire that all was O.K. Well, I'll chow first."

## CHAPTER VII

### OTHER DEVILS UNCHAINED

Buck Rariden was slightly distraught, though, and Rex could imagine why. Losing that ship meant an eighteen-thousand-dollar cash loss to the show, and he was already worrying over the fate of the taciturn pilot.

"There isn't any likelihood of his forgetting to wire——"

"He never forgits nothin'!" Rariden told us. "He's the most reliable man that ever kept his mouth shut, his ears open and his eyes on the ball. In fifteen years around shows, he's never failed to be Johnny on the spot."

"Where'd he learn to fly?" Rex asked casually.

"In the Navy, durin' the war. Save me dessert. I'm goin'."

"If he took the railroad—" started Dumpy Scarth, and Rariden interrupted from the door:

"He did. He would. He don't take no extra

chances. He knowed there was fields along there."

"Then he's probably all right, if he did have a forced landing," Daly pointed out.

"On the other hand, there are few places where he couldn't have got to one of those funny little stations and a telegrapher within two hours," Rex reminded the group at large.

Fifteen minutes later Buck was back, his face lugubrious.

"He ain't been in to Donovan Field at all, at all, and he ain't been seen by the show. He's down somewheres, boys!"

Kennard was on his feet. In that deserted wilderness of mesquite, a flyer who was half an hour overdue became a potential tragedy. Always and forever stalking the men who rode their De Havilands up and down the river was that second most terrible of disasters, wrecked and crippled, starving and suffering, helpless and far from succor of any kind.

"He started up the railroad and there is no reason to think he left his course. He couldn't get lost. I'll get Donovan ships on the northern end, and we start now. MacDowell! Scarth! Jennings! Have your ships

warmed up. Pop, radio Donovan Field to have three ships start searching southward from San Antone. First afternoon patrolmen, be ready to relieve the first searching party as soon as you return."

Other orders crackled forth. Rex went out on the westward patrol toward Laredo, with Jack Beaman in the back seat. When they returned the three searching ships had just landed. Buck Rariden was there, rushing into the field in none other than a municipal car.

Tex McDowell gave the report.

"We flew up the railroad, me over it, Jimmy and Dumpy flying paralled to me and about ten miles to my left and right. There wasn't a single sign of him or his ship anywhere!"

"But he's got to be somewhere!" said Rariden.

"The only solution must be that he decided to make a bee line for San Antone," decided the captain, "and somewhere up the railroad angled off northwest. Next ships start where the first three left off, on the west, and take a strip thirty miles wide."

They were off, Peter Miller, Captain Kennard and Rex, flying ten miles apart and comb-

ing every inch of the mesquite for a distance of a hundred miles. There they saw the Donovan ships in the air, doing the same thing. And there was not a sign of the wreck.

At four o'clock the next afternoon, after flying since dawn from both Donovan Field and McMullen, Rex stumbled wearily from his ship. Behind him were Kennard and Pete, falling out of their ships. They rambled up to the gathering on the steps of the recreation building, their eyes asking wordless questions.

"Not a word," Pop exploded nervously.

"And not a word from us," Kennard mumbled as he sank down. "He's disappeared from the face of the earth."

"Probably not that," Daly said evenly.

Daly still was not exactly a part of the flight. They treated him as naturally as they could, which was naturally enough, but he was more or less a stranger, sitting in and saying little. Rex thought he was too self-conscious to push himself at all, and he was anxious to show that he did not consider himself to have even as much right to comment as they had.

"What do you mean?" Tex asked him.

"You know. If he came down in the chapar-

ral, and burned—a charred motor underneath the trees isn't easy to spot."

They were all silent a moment.

"A wrecked ship is easy to find—but a motor, no," agreed Kennard.

Rariden came around the corner. He never asked a question. One look at the others was enough.

"Gone!" he said in that vibrating voice which was deeper than bass. He sat down, and stared moodily into the distance.

"A hell of a fine fella, boys," he said half to himself. "Looked dumb but was smart. And all the rest of it. Why can't we find him, corpse or alive! That boy never even left the railroad, I don't believe! He was safe and sane. Why ain't there a trace of him anywheres? Huh? Answer me that! If you knew him like I knew him——"

"If he flew along the railroad and came down, we'd have found him!" Kennard stated flatly. "Perhaps we might miss him in the chaparral, but not along the rails!"

"And it's certain I am that that's where he flew!"

"But where is he then?" snapped Kennard.

"It has been known for a flyer to be lured down, and then forced to fly somebody somewhere," Rex suggested.

"Remember my little soirée, don't you?" inquired Sleepy Spears. He turned to Rariden and Daly.

"I was flying along on patrol and saw a body lying in a big field. Naturally, I came down. It was a girl. The field could be landed on, so I landed. Before I got through I found out the girl had been planted there to get me down, so my ship could be used for a smuggling flight."

"It might be," Daly said quietly, "that there was another man in that bandit gang—the train robbers, I main—who escaped us. He might have just hid out, done that same trick that Sleepy describes, and forced Oley to fly him into Mexico."

"Sort of improbable, but possible," Kennard said. "In view of what Rariden said about Johannsen, it seems to me that it's either that—or that he's just a heap of charred bones out in the mesquite somewhere. Just to make sure, we'll search the railroad again to-morrow. The police all over Texas are making

inquiries, too, so that if he got lost somewhere off our beat we'll know by to-morrow."

"He never left the railroad," Rariden insisted stubbornly, and his point seemed well taken to Rex.

Rariden left for town immediately, having a dinner engagement with some of the committee in charge of the benefit, and after he had left Daly remarked:

"Of course, we must not leave out of consideration the fact that Rariden himself is still under suspicion, and that there may be more in this disappearance than meets the eye. He may know exactly where Oley is, and——"

"For what reason?" interrupted Kennard. "What purpose would there be in a disappearance?"

"None that I can figure out," Daly admitted. "I was just mentioning the possibilities."

"Possibilities," Rex informed the world at large as he got to his feet, "are rapidly driving me into a cuckoo condition than which there is no cuckooer. Von Sternberg, the circus, Oley, Rariden and the busted prop—if you find me playing paper dolls, don't be surprised, anybody."

"They haven't succeeded in getting any of

the train robbers to talk, have they?" Daly asked.

"Not that I've heard of," Kennard answered. "They're just keeping mum. The ship hasn't been traced yet, either, according to Sheriff Trowbridge. They're working to identify it and the men, of course."

"I'm anxious to see some newspapers," Tex MacDowell announced. "I'll bet that El Paso jail delivery'll arouse some comment."

"I'm waiting for a message from Graves," Daly told them. "I sure hope that I'm authorized to make a private trip into Mexico. This Von Sternberg is liable to start a whale of a fire along this river if his future lives up to the possibilities of his past."

Upon which profound thought Rex decided to take a nap. He fell asleep trying to analyze just what his feelings were regarding Buck Rariden. And for some reason he was conscious of a spreading hunch that perhaps that Irishman had depths, thoughts and activities which were somewhat in line with Daly's surmises.

Before eleven o'clock rolled around that evening, Rex felt the urge to sleep again. He had seen a telegram from the show, which was

playing Gonzales that day, urging Rariden to return right away and give full details of the loss of a perfectly good ship and pilot. That made it seem very likely, according to Buck, that they would start for the circus the next day. His activities in McMullen were meeting with such phenomenal success that his work was about done, anyway.

The well-known arms of Morpheus were enfolding Rex so tightly that he had three dreams concerning octopi, being lassoed, and a wrestling match, before he wakened to find that they had been caused by the hands of Jimmy Jennings, officer of the day, gripping his arms tightly. He had Rex sitting up in bed, and was shaking him madly.

"What's up?" Rex sputtered stupidly.

"Get out of there and help me wake up the bunch!" shouted Jimmy, his face pale with excitement and his eyes like a cat's. "Hear that ship in the air? Well, there's one up there, and I just got a message from town that every last one of those train robbers have got out of their cells, escaped through a window after binding three guards, and have just started for the border in a car armed with machine guns. It's El Paso over again!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BROWN GUN SHIP

Rex found himself outside the tent, pajama pants tucked into his boots and a leather coat above the pajamas. Jimmy was whooping down the row of tents, while Rex ran toward the hangars, where mechanics dressed for slumber were already wheeling two D.H.'s out on the line. The river was six miles away. If they could get away in a minute or two they might catch the bandit car.

As Rex ran across the field, brightly illuminated by the landing lights, the drone above him became a roar which shook the earth. A dark, squatty ship came swooping in from the north, coming low across the airdrome. Lee's sleep-drugged mind couldn't work fast enough then to even make a guess as to its purpose. He just stopped stock-still as its wheels almost scraped the ground.

Then it zoomed upward, banking as it

zoomed, until for a moment it hung on its side in the air.

"Good pilot," Rex told himself stupidly, and then he saw something large and white drop from the ship to the center of the airdrome.

A second later the strange ship had straightened out, and was scudding away from the airdrome, climbing. Rex reached the billet-doux in four gazelle-like leaps. Meanwhile he was thinking:

"They must have filed their way out of their cells. If so, who delivered the tools to them?"

The package proved to be a sheet of paper tied around a sizeable rock. The pilot had prepared his message well ahead of time, and it was brief and to the point.

"I have machine guns on this ship, and I'll shoot down any ship that tries to take off."

At that second the first Liberty roared into life, great streams of fire pouring from its exhaust pipes. Up in the darkness the other ship was circling watchfully. Across the field from the tents streamed the flyers.

Rex got to them, waving the note. The Lib-

erty's bellow had died to a whisper as the warm up started.

"Nothing we can do!" Rex bawled to Kennard. "The whole thing was worked out by someone who knew exactly what would happen. That ship up there has got guns, and we haven't a chance to get into the air!"

In the excitement there was no disposition to analyze matters in detail; that could come later. Daly was as composed as if he were sitting in a theater during the intermission, but Rex knew that beneath that unexcited exterior his brain was working a mile a minute.

Rex was striving desperately to think of some way to do something. Without consciously figuring the thing through, he was aware of a feeling that a lot of things were connected up now. This gang had friends in Mexico—so had Von Sternberg—the ship above meant two airplanes used for banditry in the last four days.

"We can't get the fleeing prisoners, but maybe we can nab that flyer and get something out of him."

Daly's cool voice cut through the hubbub, and everybody stopped talking. He had to raise

his voice as the outlaw ship came lower, warning them not to use that warming De Haviland.

In a second, his idea had penetrated their skulls. Too long an interval had passed to leave even a remote possibility of recapturing the fugitives—but the flyer above them, if caught, would supply a key to the situation.

"Turn out the landing lights!" bawled Kennard. "Get those four spare Lewises! Idle that ship, Clancy, as low as you can. Start the other one!"

Darkness blotted out the airdrome. There was no moon, but the stars hung low in the sky and supplied the suspicion of light. Minute after minute passed, while shadowy figures, bearing their burdens, placed themselves around the airdrome. The sentinel ship was higher now.

"I hope to goodness he can't see too much," Daly almost prayed.

"That's my ship they're warming—I'm elected!" Rex announced, and the fact that it was his own boat which was going to be used enabled him to out argue Dumpy Scarth, Tex MacDowell and Sleepy Spears. They were all dying for action and would have given their

shirts to be in the air. George Hickman was elected the observer—if there should be need for them to fly.

Everything was ready. Rex had been afraid that the strange plane would leave before preparations were complete. That automobile must be close to the river now, and his job was almost done.

One De Haviland was pointing up the field, toward the fence which bounded the northern rim of the airdrome. Kennard himself shoved the throttle part way on. The landing lights flooded the field again as the pilotless ship, with a hastily constructed dummy in it, bumped slowly over the sand as if taxiing into position for a take-off.

In a second the aërial watchman above them was on his way down. He streaked earthward like a rocket, his exhaust pipes leaving twin lines of fire behind him. They all held their breath.

"She's going straight!" breathed MacDowell.

The attacking plane was coming in from the west, pointed toward them, on the eastern edge of the field. Its nose was headed for the Army

plane, bouncing slowly along the ground.

"Shoot!" bellowed Kennard. Rex was fully two feet away from him but he could hear his shrill voice above the devilish clatter of the speeding plane.

Buck Rariden was flat on his stomach, and the next second Kennard and Rex and the rest were in the same position. The outlaw ship was a hundred feet high, angled downward at the decoy De Haviland and coming along at two hundred miles an hour if it was making an inch.

Every man on that airdrome, Rex realized suddenly, was facing annihilation the next moment if anything went wrong.

"That Daly is a cold-blooded proposition!" Rex groaned.

He was taking as much of a chance as anybody, but——

Red spots pricked out against the black nose of the speeding ship as its machine guns started their rattle of death. And at the same moment, from four double Lewises spotted on the eastern and western edges of the airdrome, in the shade of hangars, the answering fire came. Four observers who had handled back seat guns

for their lives in France were behind those guns.

A split second would tell the tale, and it did. Just as the empty De Haviland collided with the fence and its propeller smashed, some gun found the range of the ship which had been lured into reach of the Lewises. The roar of the motor became a broken rhythm The ship seemed to be thrown half on its side and to wobble upward instead of making a clean zoom.

"Th' boys got him!" bellowed Buck Rariden.

The bandit craft recovered. Was the pilot hurt? The machine guns were still now—the ship had zoomed out of range. With the remnants of its terrific excess speed it shot across the hangars and out of sight, two hundred feet from the ground. Its motor was coughing and spitting, but it was in the air and limping south.

"Come on, George!" Rex shouted, and the big blond observer was in the back seat of the De Haviland before Lee had found his cockpit.

"Tough luck!" he bellowed as Rex strapped his belt. "Who'd have thought his propeller wouldn't be winged!"

Rex took one quick glance at the instrument. Oil pressure, air pressure, battery charging rate and the temperature seemed to leap out at him from the dials as he shoved the throttle all the way on and pushed the stick forward.

They were taking off the short way of the field, but he made it. They fairly climbed up the sides of the hangars on the western edge of the airdrome. Hickman gripped Rex's shoulder, leaning forward to yell in his ear:

"East, he is! Still in the air, but going slow."

Rex got the D.H. around, and picked up the red spots made by their quarry's exhausts. He was more than a mile ahead of them. Rex settled down in the cockpit and tried to shove the throttle even farther ahead. The tachometer read seventeen hundred revolutions a minute, and the air-speed meter a hundred and twenty miles an hour as they flashed toward the Rio Grande.

The other ship was coming down, gradually. It was in a shallow dive, which, together with what power the crippled motor had left, was sufficient to give it a speed almost equal to

their own. It looked as if the pilot might make Mexico before he had to land and before they could catch up with him.

A half mile from the river Rex was a quarter of a mile behind him. He was very close to the ground. The first touches of dawn were visible in the east, and in a few moments they would have some light to go by.

Now Rex was diving, too, the four hundred and fifty horse power Liberty still wide open. They were doing three miles a minute as the D.H. rushed toward its prey.

"He's not a foot off the ground!" Rex told himself as he was going across the last field which lay between him and the Rio Grande. "Is he landing or trying to make it?"

It looked as though he was trying to nurse his ship across the narrow river. But he couldn't make it. Rex saw him come down, halfway across the field, but he was going too fast to make a safe landing.

"He'll go right on into the river!" Hickman bellowed into Rex's ear.

But he didn't. He elected to ground-loop. The ship turned to the right, very sharply because of its ground speed. One wing dug into

the ground. The ship did a sort of cartwheel on its nose. It seemed to collapse into one quarter of its normal size. As Rex and Hickman swooped across it, it was a compact heap of débris piled upon the ground, next to the undergrowth along the river.

Rex circled around it for five minutes as purple turned to gray in the east and a wan light crept over the earth. Not a movement rewarded his straining eyes. Evidently the pilot, unconscious or dead, was down there underneath the wreckage.

"It didn't catch fire, anyway," Rex said thankfully, and after a questioning look at George he started down for his landing.

Northward, two more McMullen De Havilands were rushing toward the scene. They came in low, hopping over the fence with the remnants of their flying speed. Rex set her down within fifty feet of the barrier, and stopped rolling the same distance from the tangled pile of linen and wire and wood which was massed against the brush.

Colts in their hands, George and Rex made their way toward it.

"Thank goodness, it's getting light enough

to see something," George breathed. "I hope he isn't dead."

"Remember that he may be playing possum," Rex warned him. "He'd know that while we were in the air our guns would have him helpless. On the ground he has a chance."

Rex picked at the wreckage as if it were charged with electricity and he had been warned that a grizzly bear in a nervous condition was hiding in it. Not a sound or a movement.

George pulled the last bunch of torn fabric away.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he stammered in an awe-struck manner, and Rex just stood and stared.

There wasn't a sign of a human being in the wreck.

It took Rex about half a minute to get his wits together.

"The son of a gun wasn't hurt and while we were still flying around in the dark, he crawled into these bushes, and probably swam under water across the river!" Rex suggested.

"Let's take a look on the ground and signal the boys in the air," George proposed.

They made their meaning clear to the ships, which promptly started circling to spot the fugitive. If he were in Mexico, they might take a chance on forcing him back across the river with machine guns. Rex looked across the river, into the depths of the chaparral. It was very thick and there was a strip of undergrowth for twenty yards along the river tangled and almost opaque. They searched along their side of the river, but found no trace of the unknown pilot.

The two ships in the air were searching methodically.

"He's either drowned in the river, or else he's found a hole to crawl into," Rex said disgustedly. "Hang it—say, George, take a look at this ship!"

It hit him all of a sudden, as he saw an undamaged section of the tail surfaces. He dug out a wing tip, too, and looked at it. The motor came in for scrutiny next, and then, with George's assistance, he tried to turn himself into a paint specialist. The airplane was painted a dark khaki, unrelieved by any other color.

Rex's eyes met the shining blue ones of the

tow-headed giant before him. His round, good-humored face was a study.

"By all that's good and great," Rex said weakly, "I believe this is Oley Johannsen's ship!"

## CHAPTER IX

### DUKE DALY SPEAKS

As a matter of fact, there was no more believing about it than there is about the difference between a piece of beefsteak and a cream puff. It was the circus ship, repainted.

Rex and George left the searching planes to their own devices and started for home. They found the boys up and around, sitting in conference in the captain's office. With them, snorting and puffing and breathing forth fire from his nostrils, was none other than Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, gray-headed veteran of the border. Buck Rariden, luckily, was not present at the moment.

Rex gave the news in a few short sentences. It had a flattering effect. He sat down on the edge of the desk, and waited.

Daly, his eyes luminous, was the first to speak.

"Rariden mustn't know that," he said in-

cisively. "The question is, does it mean that Oley Johannsen was captured, and his ship confiscated, or that he is a member of the gang?"

He answered his own question.

"It seems beyond the bounds of probability that he belonged to the outfit and simply flew down to join them. It is more probable that by some hook or crook he was kidnaped or killed and his ship taken. On the other hand, that means the coincidence of a flyer being somewhere between here and San Antone, a member of the outfit, Johnny on the spot to get a ship.

"Perhaps investigation of his past career will show something that will give us a lead. I am going on the basis that Oley himself was not flying it to-night, of course. Even were he a member of the gang, he wouldn't be flying to-night. A stranger might escape if the ship was knocked down. Oley couldn't, being known to us all."

"The said gang, of course, being Von Sternberg's," Rex said.

"It seems certain that it is," Daly nodded. "In the first place," he went on, "aërial ban-

dits aren't running wild around Mexico or the United States. In the second place, the mere fact that the gang had knowledge of the large shipment of money to the McMullen bank indicates a large and efficient organization. An airplane was used in that well-planned operation, spoiled only by accident.

"In the third place, an airplane was used to-night, and the method of rescuing the bandits was about the same as was used in El Paso to salvage the chief himself.

"In the fourth place, the fact that these men had friends who were willing to go to such lengths to spring them out of jail means a smart and powerful outfit."

"As well as one which would be badly scared at the mere possibility that one of their number might talk," stated Kennard.

"The reason that no one took the opportunity to save himself by turning State's evidence may be that they were all sure they would be helped to make their escape," Tex suggested.

Daly nodded.

"This matter of the disappearance of Oley Johannsen," he ruminated, a queer look in his eyes. "Are you all in agreement with me?

Think that there is no doubt that Oley fell into the hands of some member of the gang who was in this country, and that this man saw an opportunity to steal a ship for the cause?"

"No, I ain't!" came a loud and belligerent bellow, and Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, grand old war horse of Hidalgo County, went into action under full steam.

The leonine old man was pulling at his sweeping gray mustaches, his ordinarily kindly gray eyes now peering forth from the sun crinkles with a hard and cold light therein. He was a veritable giant, who in twenty years as a Texas Ranger and another twenty as a sheriff had learned to know border badmen.

"I ain't sayin' you're wrong, Duke," he mumbled, "but I ain't sayin' you're right by a long sight. Who brung in that file that got one man out o' his cell, gave him a chanct to get the keys from a dumb guard, an' spring the rest of 'em so's they could git out to their friends? I give this Rariden and this Johannsen full privileges because they was with a couple o' you boys. Either one of 'em could 'a'

slipped a file into a cell without no trouble."

"Furthermore," Kennard broke in, "the sheriff says that the only other people allowed in the jail to get a look at the prisoners were tried and true McMullenites who were personal friends, everyone. If a file was smuggled in, it must have been by Rariden or Johannsen."

"Of course," roared Trowbridge, walking up and down the floor with a face that was like a thunderstorm in full operation, "I ain't sayin' that by some hook or crook, from bribery o' some deputy to just an accidental oversight in searchin', it was absolutely impossible that the file didn't get there by other means. But it ain't likely!"

"On the other hand," Daly said, "granting for the sake of argument that Johannsen—which would mean that it's almost a cinch Rariden was in on it too—was tied up with Von Sternberg, why would the whole outfit be so dumb as to have Johannsen disappear under mysterious circumstances, and then use his ship to-night? If it was knocked down, it would inevitably be discovered——"

"Unless the pilot had orders to burn it if

possible," Rex interrupted. "But as you say, their methods were dumb if Oley and Rariden are mixed up at all."

"To go further," Daly said, that peculiar light still in his eyes, "if they were accomplices, why wouldn't they help their comrades during that train robbery? They didn't have machine guns, true, but they had revolvers. They could have shot Rex's prop off before he ruined the holdup and made them all captives."

This little suggestion burst upon Rex with some force. The sheriff, whose pride had been hurt beyond repair, said nothing, but strode up and down the room with a tread that fairly shook the ramshackle building.

"Incidentally, we'd better not mention to Rariden that we've identified the ship," Rex said, changing the subject somewhat. "He'll know that we would be bound to be suspicious, and it would put him on his guard."

"I still feel," Kennard said slowly, "that there must be a strong doubt about Oley's ship reaching the Von Sternberg gang by being captured."

"And yet, if they were hard up for ships and wanted to steal a few, they'd be alert for an

opportunity," Daly pointed out. "They have, or had, at least one man in this country, and if they're smugglers on the side, as you say, they'd have more—fences, and so forth. Johannsen merely ran into one, by accident or design, who could fly, and lost his ship."

"And either his life or his freedom," Rex said. "Otherwise we'd hear from him."

Daly looked around at them, and suddenly a mirthless smile flashed over his face.

"I see," he said calmly, "that in the back of all your minds is the thought that there is a strong likelihood of Oley's and Rariden's being mixed up with the bandits. I've been arguing against it to draw you out and clarify my own mind. And I believe that there is a fifty-fifty chance that by some hook or crook they are spies, allies, or what you will, of Von Sternberg. If I could figure any logical reason for his wanting accomplices who are showmen, I'd be almost certain. In any event, Rex, you've got a job for yourself with the show: to verify or prove groundless our suspicions about Rariden, the remaining man we know. It does not necessarily follow that anyone else in the show is mixed up in it. Rariden is the one to watch.

I'll arrange for Federal men from San Antone to be around the show—as workmen, if possible, if not as supposed patrons who stay on the lot a great deal because they're interested—and you and they will have two objectives. One, to find out whether Buck Rariden's old system of circus ethics still holds sway and there are plans afoot to rook the town of McMullen; the other, to see whether Von Sternberg enters into the situation."

Pete Miller slid off the edge of a table and shook his head. His small mustache was growing smaller as he almost pulled it out by the roots.

"Here come the ships," Rex said, walking to the door. "Maybe they'll have news. That pilot couldn't have gotten far away."

"If it should happen to be Oley, what a lot of figuring it would save!" Sleepy Spears said hopefully.

The two De Havilands landed, and Penoch O'Reilly and Pop Cravath got out. A second later they were lifting from the rear cockpit of Cravath's ship a small, limp figure.

The flyers streamed across the field. Rex

saw Buck Rariden coming up the boardwalk between the tents, and he too broke into a run.

One look at the pilot was enough. He was dead, for one thing; and his dark lean face was not that of Oley Johannsen.

"Picked up his body in the river stuck under some bushes," boomed Penoch O'Reilly. "He crawled into the river and tried to escape, but couldn't make it. Look at that hole in his side. One of the bullets got him pretty."

"Sure had guts," was the requiem of Jimmy Jennings.

Penoch planted himself, as usual, and his fingers stabbed out at them. His eyes, fairly crackling forth from his square face with the spirit of him, danced from one to the other.

"Have you ever heard of or seen a Von Sternberg man that didn't?" he demanded.

The answer was no.

The flyers, with the knowledge that that dead pilot had been flying Johannsen's ship, seemed to look at Rariden in a new light. Rex did himself. The gaunt Irishman, up to then, had been just the shadow of a criminal to him. If pinned down, he would have said that he did not believe that propeller incident, or his past,

or anything else had proved to his satisfaction that Buck was capable of murder.

Now, as the collection of mysterious happenings grew in size, he suddenly found himself shrinking from the Irishman as from a thing unclean. He had a sudden helpless feeling. Rariden was too good an actor, could carry off his nefarious propositions with entirely too great a quantity of *savoir-faire* and nonchalance, not to mention competence.

"Of course," Penoch went on, his face grim and strained, "this whole business makes it a cinch about Fred's mob. I'd like to know who's running it for him—or ran it for him, rather—while he was supposed to be sick in El Paso."

"I guess we'd better send you north on leave," Rex observed. "Now that he's back he'll probably start talking. Your spoiling that dirigible deal and helping put him in jail won't sit so well with him."

It was a strange tangent to the conversation, perhaps, standing around a corpse, but somehow it seemed all the more likely, at that moment, that Penoch, due to Von Sternberg's personal enmity, might soon be a corpse himself.

"I wouldn't leave!" flashed the indomitable little runt. "But I'll sure break my neck to get that guy if he ever shows up in person!"

"Maybe we can find out who this boy is, from fingerprints and suchlike," ruminated Sheriff Trowbridge. "How about using your ambulance to git him into town, Cap'n?"

"Sure," agreed the captain.

Rex's eyes followed his to Rariden. The showman was standing over the corpse, looking down into the face in deep reverie that might almost be sorrow.

"Don't think you know him, do you, Buck?" Rex asked him suddenly, and he almost jumped.

"No, but I'm thinkin' that there's but one explanation o' Oley not bein' here. I've jist made up me mind, final like. He was a-flyin' up the railroad, and by some manner o' means he gits into the clutches o' somebody that is, or wants to be, a Von Sternberg man, or else just wants t' git to Mexico quick and secret. He either makes Oley fly him down, or kills him and flies himself."

Now that Rex was far from sure of Rariden, he immediately thought:

"If Buck was in on the whole deal, knew

that their ship was needed for to-night's work, and realized that there was a strong likelihood that we'd discover that the outlaw ship was Oley's, what would he do? He'd start explaining the ship's being used by the Von Sternberg man, which is what he's done!"

"Well, me for breakfast," Lee said finally. "You are all cordially invited to a good wash in the bathhouse, to be followed by bacon and eggs in the north dining room."

He wandered away, followed by Tex MacDowell and Daly.

"You'll have a great time with the show, I'll bet," Tex drawled plaintively, "and you may have to keep your eyes open for your own good. Buck, even if he hates the thought of you being around, still couldn't refuse to let you go. But he might get you out of the way, temporarily."

"I wish I could go," Daly said.

Rex looked around, and instantly he realized what was on his mind. Again, in just a minor way, he was paying for the past. His very usefulness as Graves' assistant was lessened because of what he had been. His tiff with Rariden had forced him from cover. It was impossible for him even to ask to go with the show.

Rex didn't know just what to say. They were silent for a moment, then Rex blurted:

"Oh, well, what do you care? You can't have everything. I'll admit I'm looking forward to it, and with your training you could discover a lot more, if there's anything to be discovered, than I could. You've done more than your share. You spotted Rariden as a suspicious character, didn't you? Your feud with him, in a manner of speaking, is responsible for our knowing anything!"

For some reason they all turned into Tex's tent.

"Duke," Tex said easily, "is probably one of the most valuable men the Government has —for the very reason that he's so familiar with all the rackets, and the underworld."

"And liable to be recognized whenever I go out on a job," Daly said quietly, his lips smiling but his eyes shadowed.

"Don't get one of those fits, you big fool!" Tex razzed him.

The Duke got up and shook himself. In breeches, boots and a white shirt, he looked like a stripling of twenty-three or four. The uncanniness of that youthful face with those age-

old eyes peeking forth from it was an eerie thing.

"I know it," he said slowly. "Excuse me, Rex. I don't know you very well, but I don't mind. This whole thing has got me. Being here, in the first place. If there's one thing in this world I want to do and be, it's to fly and be a flying officer in the Army. I can't. Why? Because I was a professional gambler, and it's known just widely enough to make me blackballed as officer material."

Suddenly his iron control broke. There was thunder and lightning in his eyes, and his mouth seemed to be snarled savagely at Fate.

"I'm sick and tired of sneaking around, afraid that somebody will expose me, knowing all the time that the people I'm with would be casting sidelong looks at me and hiding their silver if they knew what I'd been! I wouldn't give a hang, don't give a hang—for them personally. I can live happily without anybody! But the hypocrisy of it gets me. Gambler that I was, I know I'm a better man than fifty per cent of the people who'd draw their skirts away from me!"

Rex could scarcely believe his ears and eyes.

Now he realized what a terrific ordeal the man had been through during those days, and what iron it had taken to walk through his part so scornfully. A shell of indifference had been built around him—but it didn't go too deep.

"That may go with a lot of people," Rex said, "but it doesn't go with this mob, Duke."

Suddenly he was himself again. He smiled that repressed little smile, his eyes warm and friendly.

"I know that. With you two, anyway. And I'm cuckoo. I've brooded so much I've got ingrowing introspection, so to speak. Every once in a while it gripes me, though. I feel as if every soul that looked at me even here was thinking and wondering just how fundamentally honest I am. And when I add to that the feeling that I'm handicapped, as now, on a job, it sort of cuts me out of everything."

They forgot breakfast, and when they finally did get there they were alone. For two or three hours the three of them just discussed things, one way and another, and the Duke, for the second time in his life, Rex thought, let himself go. Bit by bit Rex got the story. And the bitterness and loneliness and hardship of his boy-

hood became clearer and clearer to Lee, until when the incident of his being picked up, starving, in Oklahoma and made a gambler took its proper place Rex said to himself:

"Well, I'd have done most anything then for a thousand dollars or a pair of shoes!"

And there was another strange thing. Rex didn't know why he felt that way, exactly. He'd met his share of the great of the earth. Why should he feel honored to have been admitted under the shell of Duke Daly? Why should his willingness to make Rex his third real friend seem like one of the greatest compliments the young flyer had ever received?

Rex didn't know unless it was because he felt that a man who'd raised himself by his boot straps deserved the respect of anybody. And for a man to be an exception to any rule indicates something exceptional in him, good or bad.

Besides, he found himself liking the Duke.

## CHAPTER X

### THE BIG SHOW

Had anyone been in a certain stuffy railroad coach the day following the flyers' before-breakfast exercise, they would have observed, in two seats which faced each other, a pair of remarkable looking men. One, Rex Lee, had his legs parked on the seat opposite, his collar open at the neck, and a handkerchief ready to wipe off his face before the perspiration got out of control.

The other one, Mr. Buck Rariden, had no coat on at all, although he had made a concession to convention by carrying it. His vest swung open; his long, freckled face was facing the window, and above it his hat sat on the extreme posterior of his dome. His sandy hair was tangled, and his brooding eyes were resting absently on the scenery which flashed by at fully twenty miles an hour.

They had flown as far as Donovan Field and

were entrained, at four o'clock in the afternoon, for the town of Hondura, where the circus was showing that day. The following morning it would be in San Antonio for a two-day week-end stand, thence a Sunday jump to McMullen, and Monday was the day of days.

They hadn't talked much. Rex had considerable to think of, both before and behind him. So far as was possible, all the machinery was in operation. Buck and Oley were being investigated, as well as the season's history of the Barr-Maxwell show. The Government of the United States, somewhat secretly, was hinting to the powers that be in Mexico, that one Von Sternberg, nesting in their midst, was causing considerable trouble along the border and that it would be a great relief if his activities were curtailed by the gendarmes. Sheriff Trowbridge, grumbling and biting ferociously at his mustaches, was making secret preparations to police McMullen as it had never been policed before during the big shindig on Monday. Fingerprints and a description of the unknown pilot had been broadcast, and from San Francisco to Mexico City the forces of the law were supposed to be looking earnestly for one

Oley Johannsen. That he was in Mexico, if alive, seemed a lead pipe cinch, but they were overlooking no bets.

"What's the matter, Buck?" Rex said finally. "Your face is not its beaming self, so to speak. No one would think you'd put across a big deal in McMullen."

"Say, I got that there town by the tail, didn't I?" he flashed back, and for a moment the old sparkle was in his eyes.

"Of course, losing Oley isn't so pleasant——"

"You're darned roight it ain't—and the Old Man seems to have went nuts about it."

"Barr, you mean?" Rex asked him. "Say, why does the owner travel with the show?"

"He ain't but a quarter owner. He's an old showman; likes the atmosphere, I guess. I got the title o' manager, but I rate about assistant. He's the big cheese."

"And he's all worked up over Oley, eh?" Rex asked.

That interested him, if true. If he really was excited about it, it meant that one Mr. Barr wasn't in on Oley's deal, if any. That is, if Oley had deliberately deserted, Barr knew no

reason for it. Which means that a tie-up with Von Sternberg was not a circus matter, but an individual idea.

"Is he? Won't I git raked over the coals!"

"It wasn't your fault."

"That won't make no difference."

Rex almost laughed aloud at the thought of Buck Rariden being scared at the prospect of meeting his boss.

They relapsed into thought for a moment. Then, out of a clear sky, Rariden said:

"I hear that Duke Daly is workin' fur the Government now."

He was scrutinizing Rex closely as he said that. Rex side-stepped.

"I know he used to—when he was with the Border Patrol, of course——"

"What a laugh that'd be!" Rariden fairly spat.

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Not by a darned sight, I don't! Him runnin' around tryin' t' git a fellow in bad——"

"He didn't, Buck! He tried to keep from even recognizing you! You forced it on yourself, and——"

"Oh, the simple fool!" Rariden growled

with sublime disregard for logic or the facts. "And I know what he's worked up to. Don't think Buck Rariden's any fool. I could see when I was talkin' to them fellers in McMullen that they knowed somethin', and wasn't trustin' me all the way. Same with you fellers. Not you, but some of 'em. Tryin' t' go straight does a lot o' good with somebody always around t' knock ye down."

His eyes were searching Rex's as he gave vent to these thoughts. Rex felt certain that he was trying to pump him.

"Don't git me wrong, Rex," he said finally. "I loik ye, and ye're my kind. Not an upstage dummy like Daly. And mark ye this. Some men go wrong without goin' wrong inside, get me? Others is cold fish that's born cold and can't niver change. That's Daly."

"Maybe so," Rex said, to draw him on, "but what were you going to say?"

"This. I figure you're here just t' keep track o' me and look over the show because o' what Daly said. I don't give a hang. You're welcome to look all ye please."

"Don't be silly!" Rex advised him, while he thought:

"Licked before I start! He's got everything figured out, and if there is anything sour about the show I'll never find it out."

"I wouldn't blame ye," Rariden went on, "in view o' the circumstances. I ain't holdin' it agin ye. I'd do the same meself!"

"Why do you hate Daly so much?"

"Ah, he's such a conceited, fishy yegg that thinks he's the king o' all creation, an' too good fur us roughnecks!"

That, Rex decided instantly, was what lay at the bottom of the Irishman's vast antipathy for Daly as a personality. In birth and breeding and mental outlook, the Duke was not as the average man he had associated with during his underworld days, and their consciousness of vague inferiority made him distrusted, disliked and uneasily respected.

"Well, here we are!" said Rariden as the train slowed to a stop. "I'll bet the Old Man is at the station!"

He wasn't, but a Western Union boy was, with a telegram for Rex. It was from McMullen, and it read:

TELEPHONE IMMEDIATELY
KENNARD

"I've got to make a phone call," he told Buck. "Can you wait a minute?"

"Sure. See that little truck over there? The show's name's on it. That's for us. I'll wait for ye there."

Again that speculative look was in those blue eyes of his. He was wondering about that telegram. Rex fumed mentally, with venom and fluence, as he made for the phone booth. He would be about as useful around that circus as a drink of water would be to a drowning man.

It didn't take long to get McMullen, and soon Kennard's voice came over the wires.

"Don't ask questions," he barked. "We've found out that the file used in that jail break came from the crew's shop. That makes it a certainty that Oley Johannsen or Rariden smuggled in a file to one of those bandits. Also, it's a cinch that Oley deliberately flew his ship back into Mexico and joined Von Sternberg. Got it? Be on your guard, of course. What we know now makes it equally sure that they shot you and Daly down when that prop broke. So watch your step."

"O.K.!" Rex answered dazedly. "Now

listen to this. Buck is wise, and what good I can do, I don't know."

Rex told the captain briefly of his conversation with Rariden.

"Stick around awhile, anyway," ordered Kennard. "Watch out for accidents. They can't murder you openly, at least!"

Rex joined the brooding Rariden in the truck.

Oley was now as good as convicted. Rariden must be considered equally guilty, on the strength of Oley's criminality. Rariden had just indicated that he knew Daly was working for the Government. That made the attempted killing of Daly and Rex easier to believe. Rariden, of course, was in on that. . . . So ran Rex's racing thoughts.

No more was said as they sped through the streets of the little town. Rex could sense the holiday atmosphere which the circus always brings to a small town and, as they neared the lot, streams of people sort of coagulated, bound for the show. It was only five thirty, but they were on their way.

They got off in front of the midway, which held a respectable number of customers al-

ready. A side-show barker was at work, and the tenders of refreshment stands were howling their wares.

"We'll chow first," Buck told Rex.

As they walked down the midway, turned past the side-show tent that faced it and made their way to the cook tent, Rex noticed several things. The strongest impression he received was of the dinginess of the show. The big top and the menagerie top, alongside it, were dirty and looked worn and discouraged. The pennants were discolored. The two ticket takers on the side show were badly in need of shaves, and the barker seemed weary. There was a general "down-at-the-heel" atmosphere about, all the more depressing because the show was a big one.

The cook tent was about a hundred yards back of the midway line, and as they entered it Buck greeted the steward absently and said to Rex:

"We'll eat on the stag end. The left side is fur men and women both—kinkers, executives and women. We'll eat with the bosses."

Which they did. Rex knew from Penoch that the heads of all departments in a circus were

bosses on the lot, although they were "superintendents" in cold type. He was introduced to a dozen tanned, hard-bitten old-timers at their table: Boss elephant man, boss hostler, boss blacksmith, boss animal man, boss canvas man, side-show boss, and the rest. The next table to theirs was occupied by assistant bosses. The group at the various boards ranged down the social scale to the canvas men, eating in the rear of the big tent.

The food was plain, plentiful and good. Buck seemed popular, and the question on everyone's lips was about Oley, first, and about prospects in McMullen, second. The boss hostler, a dried up little old man with a million wrinkles in his face, said finally:

"This show sure needs a break. McMullen better pan out, or the Old Man'll be crazy! He's a wild man now."

The entire tent looked at Rex with great curiosity, and after the bosses, who had started eating before they had, had left he asked Buck:

"They don't know why I'm here, do they?"

Buck shook his head.

"I didn't say nothin' about it," he told Rex.

He certainly was downcast. Rex just

couldn't believe that his patent worry could be laid entirely to his dread of meeting his boss. Why should he dread it? Certainly not because Oley was lost. He'd done a good job for the show in McMullen. Could it be because he had been literally compelled to drag Rex along as a guest?

"Well, let's see Jim," Rariden said suddenly. "The tent'll be down on our heads if we don't."

Which was the truth. Already the great steam wagon had been unhooked and the kitchen, in the rear of the cook tent, was practically dismantled. Canvas men were at work on the guy ropes of the main structure.

"She'll be packed and on the train in three-quarters of an hour," Buck told him as they walked out. "See that tent way over back o' the padroom comin' down? That's the horse tent."

"According to Penoch O'Reilly," Rex said, "they even tear the menagerie down before the show's half over."

"Sure. By the time the show's over there ain't nothin' left but the big top and the back yard."

"What's the back yard?" Rex inquired.

"That canvas wall around the back o' the big top. See them small tents inside it? Them's the wardrobe top, the ballet top, the padroom, and so forth. I guess we'll find Jim at the stob wagon."

"Is that what Penoch O'Reilly calls the stake and chain wagon?"

"Sure. The stake and chain man keeps soap, water, towels and such like fur the bosses. Easy-chairs, too. That's headquarters fur the bosses. Stake and chain man's a good job around a show, even these days. Tips every week."

Dusk had fallen, and the electric lights along the midway flared into life. As they walked down the slight slope, toward it, the crowd looked larger. Balloon men, banner men, badge men and the like were hawking their wares loudly. The big top was alight, too, and the side-show band was blaring lustily. The fat woman came out of the rear of the tent to get a breath of fresh air, followed by the tatooed man. All around the big top, canvas men were tightening ropes against the evening dew, and a hundred yards back of the padroom more

than a hundred gray horses, shelterless now, loomed against the darkness like oversized sheep. The crowds were streaming into the midway, and the lot was taking on life and color and romance for Rex.

"Here's Jim!" Rariden said suddenly.

For the first time, as Rex saw a vague, bulky figure hurrying toward them around a huge pole wagon, the position he was in swept over him. Probably the darkness and the strangeness of his surroundings had something to do with it. The big Irishman next to him was a canny, crafty, cold-blooded criminal. The show, perhaps, held within it a dozen outlaws, or even more, and there was something sinister about it. What hopes and plans were hidden in its six hundred people? Oley Johannsen had shown his colors. Did Friederich Von Sternberg, hiding in the remote depths of Mexico, have a hand in the Barr-Maxwell Circus?

"And just where does one Rex Lee, known spy, stand around this joint?" he asked himself, and got no answer.

He could feel his heart pounding faster, and suddenly life seemed very succulent and sweet as he mentally started peering in all directions,

alert for trouble. He felt as if every shadow held a clew.

"Where the deuce have you been?" bellowed Mr. James Barr from a distance of forty feet.

"Thought we'd chow before they tore down," barked Rariden. "Well, Boss, we done a good job in McMullen and she looks set fur a thirty-thousand-dollar day at the least."

"Darned near enough to pay fur that ship!" sneered Barr.

As he came toward them with short, choppy strides, Rex got a good look at him. He was about medium height, coming almost to Rex's chest, but he was so broad he looked short and fat, although his weight gave the impression, rather, of hard flesh. His face was a full moon, and there were dozens of deep, overhanging wrinkles in it. His eyes were encased in flesh, making them look small. They were bloodshot, too, as if from lack of sleep, and his brow was corrugated in deep, apparently permanent wrinkles.

"Jim, this here's Lieutenant Rex Lee, of McMullen. He's gonna be the guest o' the show fur a few days after helpin' us out tremendous down there."

"You don't say!" exploded Mr. Barr, his voice breaking nervously.

As he removed his cigar, Rex noted that his hand was trembling. His face became almost purple, and he seemed to be trying to get a few apoplectic words loose, without much success.

Some of his wrath appeared to evaporate by the time he could talk.

"This ain't personal, Lieutenant," he growled venomously. "I don't know you from Adam. What the deuce d'you mean, Buck, bringin' in outsiders when the show's already too big to handle?"

"He can sleep with me!"

"The deuce he can! You got somebody in with you now. You got no business doin' that——"

"Wha'd'ya mean, I ain't!" blazed Rariden. "These flyers helped this show out in McMullen, and you, ye fool, can't see that treatin' 'em this way——"

"Pipe down, pipe down! Who's runnin' this show?"

He turned toward Rex, his pig eyes glittering with wrath.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant, but we ain't got a

spot fur you, and there ain't no way we can carry you. Stick around durin' the day, but we can't carry you at night."

He whirled on Rariden.

"What happened to Oley Johannsen, and tell me the truth, you red-headed mick!"

His straw hat was over one eye, now, looking like a saucer on the head of an elephant. If ever Rex had seen a man who was literally twitching with nervousness, it was Barr.

"I told ye!" blazed Rariden, his face red and his huge fingers writhing significantly.

While Rariden repeated the story of the disappearance of Oley, as he knew it or pretended to know it, Rex was thinking:

"This bird Barr wasn't in on Oley's trip to join Von Sternberg. That means the show itself isn't working with Von Sternberg. I'll bet that Buck Rariden was afraid——"

"Well, I don't believe it," blared Barr. "In my opinion, that flat-faced, square-headed, yellow-bellied snake stole the ship!"

His eyes seemed to be boring into Rariden's, seeking for information there.

"The old boy called the turn, and he believes

Buck was in on it and Buck was afraid that that's just what he'd think!" Rex told himself jubilantly.

"Can't believe it!" Rariden said positively. "Chief, airplanes ain't no wheelbarrows! Sure an' Oley's layin' out in the mesquite somewheres. Didn't I tell ye when we bought it that a missin' cylinder at the wrong time meant a total loss? It was a good idee, for advertisin' and droppin' circulars and passenger carryin', but I told ye what the risk was and you got no call to beef if you lose now!"

The trembling old showman lighted a new cigar, and the flame he tried to hold to its tip almost burned off both of his ears before he got the range.

"Well, I bought me another ship. Joins in San Antone, with a pilot. Cheap Jenny——"

"Goin' crazy?" Rariden asked tactfully. "Only another month t' go, show practically broke, and you layin' out money——"

"It's my money, ain't it?" bawled Barr. "What about McMullen, now? Come on over to the stob wagon where I can sit down."

He led the way around the big top, just out-

side the ropes. As they walked he and Rariden were in earnest conversation, and Rex was reflecting:

"Didn't take him long to buy another ship. He must be desperate. I don't see why an advertising plane is so important."

They planted themselves under a canvas canopy attached to the side of the stake and chain wagon. Rex listened in on the chatter of Barr and Rariden, but there was nothing important in it save for the fact that every time Oley's name was mentioned Barr went into a series of the most awe-inspiring and original tantrums that had ever reached Rex's ears. He never repeated a word, and at last Rex thought to himself:

"He couldn't hate Oley more if he knew the truth. He's sure positive for one that's just guessing."

The candy butchers, ushers and ticket men were getting their uniform coats on in a small tent next to the stob wagon. Most of them were youngsters—not more than twenty-two or three. Rex was listening closely to Rariden and Barr. The owner certainly did want to know all the details about McMullen, from the

number of blocks on the main street to the number of members of the Rotary Club. Rex was wondering whether Buck would mention Duke Daly, but he did not.

"It looks to be a cinch that Rariden and Barr aren't exactly brothers in any company," he reflected. "If there's crooked work afoot, when the show hits McMullen, it looks as though the show as a whole wasn't in on it. I guess Rariden and Oley alone have something up their sleeves. Maybe to steal some money and fly over the border. In that case, though——"

"For the love o' Mike! Slimy McRae!"

It was an exclamation from Buck, caused by the appearance of an emaciated, leathery-faced man of forty or so with squinty eyes and a shuffling walk. He disappeared into the tent and emerged in about three seconds with a uniform coat on and a cap with its peak extending low over his eyes. He was old enough to be the father of the other men who dressed there.

"What is that grifter doin' around this show?" demanded Rariden.

"He was broke and showed up, so I give him a job. Candy butcher."

"I'll watch my pants while he's around," grunted Rariden. "Them ain't no kind to have around this outfit, Jim. It's them guys——"

"Pull in your neck!" bawled Barr furiously. "He ain't sellin' tickets, is he, or where he can do any harm?"

"No," Rariden said doggedly, "maybe he ain't—but what does he do after hours? Crack a spare safe, maybe, huh? Just ain't the right thing."

"Mind your own business, and if you don't like it git out!" yelled Barr.

He certainly was a nervous individual. Entirely too nervous over the theft of an eighteen-thousand-dollar ship. That's a lot of money, but a man who owns an airplane must figure on the possibility of its quick demise at any given moment.

Rariden, for a second, looked as if he were going to tear his boss limb from limb.

"Darned if I wouldn't be glad to git off this show!" he replied furiously. "What's the matter with you? You're worse'n any old woman I ever seen. It's makin' a spectacle of yourself ye are, and I'm tellin' you whether ye like it or not!"

That tirade, surprisingly, seemed to slow the Old Man down.

"Oh, shut up!" he said weakly. "Now about that McMullen lot——" and they were off again.

Naturally, with Rex's purpose with the show known by Rariden, he would have said nothing incriminating in the flyer's presence anyway. However, neither he nor Barr showed any inclination for private conversation. Rex thought he had the lay pretty well figured out—a plot of some kind as between Sternberg, Oley and Rariden—but somehow he couldn't be certain of his opinions. There were a dozen little things which indicated opposite possibilities to him.

Suddenly, the band blared forth in the big top, starting the before-the-show concert. From the midway, hidden by the tents, there came a ceaseless hum. The cries of ticket takers and barkers cut through it incessantly.

"Step right up! Hurry along, folks, hurry along. Show starting inside! This way to the big show!"

One bull-like voice, keeping up this ceaseless

chant, far outshone the strained efforts of the side-show spieler.

"Well, I'd better git goin' if ye've got everything straight," said Mr. Rariden. "Come on, Rex, and take a look."

They looked, finally ending up in the thronged back yard where the grand opening spectacle was being formed. The square of grass surrounded by wagons, small tents and the canvas wall, was a maze of gaudily dressed men and women, elephants, horses and what have you. There were two groups, one to enter through the connection between menagerie tent and big top and the other aimed at the big top entrance itself. Dozens of canvas men, both white and colored, were made up as everything from Roman legionaries to Zulus.

"Everything except the hot dog men go in this," remarked Rariden.

He prowled around, through the big top, out around the wagons where horses were already being hooked up preparatory to getting equipment to the trains as fast as it was used, and finally he seemed to be looking fixedly into the faces of many of the made-up laborers in the back yard. Every once in a while he grunted.

He absently returned the greetings thrown at him. Three times Rex saw him stop, his finger shaking under some man's nose, and apparently ask him what he was doing around the show.

As the performance went on Rariden scowled more and more, and was about as talkative as a sick oyster. Rex stayed out around the menagerie tent, watching it being torn down. As fast as the animal troupes got through, their cages were drawn out, and the top was coming down before the lions had even appeared in the arena. They returned from their Thespian endeavors to cages which were out in the open air, and the elephants were standing in a long line, unshielded from non-paying eyes.

A stout and bearded individual known as Studebaker Slim, assistant to the boss canvas man, was nominally in charge of the teardown, but Buck took it over. Apparently he wanted to ease his steadily rising wrath against the world in general. He bellowed and coaxed and bullied until he had close to a hundred canvas men making speed records. The assistant bosses followed suit, and the teardown became a frenzied thing. Rex had never seen Buck in

action, and it was entertaining. He had a voice which, when opened up, made Penoch O'Reilly's voice a whisper. He could have stood on a street corner in Chicago, gone into full voice, and won the hog-calling championship of Arkansas.

But the little matter of the menagerie top, apparently, was only a prelude. Buck had plank wagons driving into the big top almost before the show was over. Four gangs, working under four assistant bosses, were tearing down the seats like mad as Buck's voice reverberated against the roof. Rex saw him knock a loafer down and threaten another one. In what seemed to the flyer about fifteen minutes, the huge top was as empty as the railroad station in Sauk Center is at four o'clock in the morning. Now they were at quarter poles, dragging them down, and soon thereafter Rex was up by the light wagon, watching the big top come down in the glare of the great searchlights which swept the lot. The four center poles stood gaunt and useless, while hundreds of men, like ants, swarmed over the billowing canvas and started unlacing it into sections and rolling it up. It was a scene of industry, of

work done with dizzying speed, and somehow, as Rex surveyed it, the lure of the circus was stronger within him than it had ever been in boyhood days.

Buck Rariden dominated that lot. To Rex it seemed that he, single handed, was responsible for the steady stream of wagons, drawn by superb baggage stock, which trundled out of the field and on down to the runs, the route marked by flaring torches set on street corners. Ringing the great lot were hundreds of people, watching. It was Buck Rariden at his job, loving it, doing it well.

The canvas was being rolled into great sausages and pulled into the canvas wagons by teams of horses. Around the edges of the lot stake pullers were at work. The job was almost done, and Buck, his eyes snapping, joined Rex at the light wagon. His mouth was thin and twisted, and his eyes boded no good as he said surlily:

"Stick around, me boy, and within five minutes ye'll see the fight o' your life!"

"Huh?" Rex grunted.

"The very same," Buck went on, licking his chops in dour anticipation. His face was dark

and savage. "Likewise, ye'll see Buck Rariden fired off the Barr-Maxwell show right now!"

"How come?" Rex asked him in a degree of astonishment which was by no means assumed.

"Because," he said, his voice grating, "I'm gonna tell the Old Man what I think o' him and his show both!"

"Listen, don't let him get on your nerves and do something foolish. As far as I'm concerned, if there's isn't room, it's all right with me."

"It ain't that! But he's shoved into this show, all of a sudden, fifteen or twenty o' the crookedest grifters that ever followed a strong carnival! I'll be darned if he ain't got a convention o' hustlers from three-shell men to parade workers! And I—listen, Rex."

His eyes were staring into the young flyer's, and his finger was tapping against Rex's chest.

"Daly, hang him, picks me out as a jailbird, does he? And gits everybody watchin' me, does he? Buck Rariden ain't on the square, huh? Well, ye're gonna see now, and soon, whether he is or not. Since I got wise t' myself, I'm off that stuff like a dirty shirt, and likewise it don't pay! And I'm leavin' this show fur one reason—because the Old Man is

gettin' short changers and grifters in here, and aims to work *strong*. Go back to McMullen and tell the Prince o' Wales thot!"

Suddenly it seemed to Rex that about two thousand assorted and unrelated things clicked into place in his mind, forming a complete picture. A million ideas shot in and out as he stared over the busy lot, seeing nothing. Two things stood out in the welter of speculation within him. One was that Buck Rariden's pride had been hurt and hurt badly because the past was being held against him. The other was that the freckled-faced, long-nosed, loose-tongued Irishman before him fairly radiated utter sincerity.

Then and there Rex decided on a course which involved a desperate chance. But he felt sure of his ground for the moment.

"Come here, Buck Rariden!" he ordered, and led him back into the darkness.

"You say Barr has charged this show with crooks since you've been gone?"

"Absolutely! I recognize fifteen old grifters meself! Lord knows how many more."

"What's his reputation?"

"In the old days, as smart and dishonest a

showman as ever walked. Lately, good, like all of 'em. Mainly because they had to be."

"He's had a tough season, and is trying to rake in the dough by every means, then—and doubtless McMullen he figures as a bonanza, eh?"

"Looks so to me. What ye gettin' at? Gonna crab the deal?"

"Listen, Buck," Rex interrupted him, and the excitement was rising high within him. "Before I say a word, let me tell you this. I'm here because we have reason to suspect that monkey business is afoot in connection with the big day at McMullen. To be perfectly frank, we figured you as one of the ringleaders. What I'm saying is this. I don't think you are. But whether you are or not, let me tell you they're having this show shadowed efficiently by Government men. If you're guilty, which I don't believe you are, you can do nothing so good for yourself as to throw in with me, anyhow. If you aren't one of the thugs, you'll want to help us out. You're sunk right now if there's dirty work at the crossroads. You couldn't get away."

Rex was bluffing, of course, because the Fed-

eral men wouldn't be at work until the next day, at San Antone. But he felt it of paramount importance to put his scheme across.

Buck's face was a study. He looked as if he couldn't make up his mind whether to kill Rex where he stood, or merely call him a fool.

"Now, listen," Rex went on quickly, as Rariden started to say something. "In the first place, we know Oley Johannsen is not on the level. We know absolutely that he deliberately stole that ship and flew down into Mexico and joined up with Von Sternberg."

For a moment Buck stood speechless. Then he bowled Rex over by saying slowly:

"I was afraid o' that every minute since he disappeared."

"You weren't in on it at all?"

"That I was not! If it wasn't you that said it, I'd break every bone——"

"All right. Calm down. Then your worry about him is what made you feel so peculiar the last few days, eh?"

"Sure. I dunno why I felt that, exactly—Oley's been a good feller as far as I know. But——"

"All right. Another thing. Duke Daly and I were sure that that prop breaking——"

"Begad, I wasn't gonna mention that, but that was what got me startin' t' think and wonder about Oley. He was in the back seat. I couldn't be sure, but Rex, I had a feelin' that I seen, out o' the corner o' me eye or the back o' me head, Oley puttin' a gun away. He could 'a' shot from behind me like that—I'd never heard it or knowed about it—an' mebbe he did. Or mebbe it's just a dream I had. I couldn't be sure. But it seemed so cuckoo—he'd have no motive—that I dismissed it as crazy and said nothin'."

"I believe you. And I believe I have his motive. In view of what you've told me, I think the situation may be this."

"Wait a minute. You're sure ye believe what I'm tellin' ye?" Buck interrupted, his eyes searching Rex's with a mixture of belligerence and childlike pleading. "The gun stuff was ridic'lous, and I couldn't say nothin'. But it was just enough t' make me wonder, when he disappeared that mysterious-like, if maybe——"

"Sure I believe you." And Rex did.

For a few seconds they fell silent while Rex underwent the Irishman's inspection. The lot was being cleared with miraculous speed. The canvas was stowed away, wagons were rumbling about, and the army of workers was melting toward the train. The center poles were carried on dozens of shoulders, to a huge pole wagon drawn by eight horses. The shouts of the bosses were less frequent now, and some of the wild drive in them had disappeared. The spectators were leaving, too, and within five minutes a naked lot would give no indication of the city of people and tons of equipment which had made it a mecca that day.

"Now listen," Rex said finally, "Barr has had a disastrous season. He was desperate. He figured out this McMullen coup as a profitable venture and, we'll say, his thoughts turned wistfully back to the old days when a show went through a town and lifted everything out of it except the houses. He——"

"That's Jim. He's a square showman because he has t' be."

"So he decides that McMullen will be a good place for a clean-up. Everybody'll be at the show at night, and there'll be loads of money

in town. So he lays his plans to stack the show with a few well-known boys who can do anything from crack a safe to rob the jewelry stores when the town is almost deserted. If he included the bank—and of course he'd rely on the closeness of McMullen to the river—there'd be no reason why he couldn't get away with more than a half million. However——"

"Sure!" Rariden broke in excitedly. "Why, before the day was out a slick mob could clean up——"

"You know more about the methods than I. Anyway, for the sake of argument, we'll grant that he's planned a financial coup in McMullen. Probably in such a way that he won't be suspected himself. The grifters, escaped into Mexico, will be blamed, with Barr's part, as directing head, unknown. They just hit town under cover of circus day.

"Anyway, granting that, he enlisted Oley Johannsen with him. Oley has proved himself, definitely, a thug. Maybe Barr knew something about him before. He wants to use Oley for one of two reasons. One might be to hold back the McMullen planes, just as Von Sternberg's man did, to prevent an airplane chase

before everybody was safely in Mexico. The other might be to fly the swag over the border. The last seems more likely to me."

"It does t' me too!" Buck declared.

Those eyes of his were like a couple of torches. His gaunt body was leaning forward, and he was literally aflame with interest. As Rex talked, it seemed that everything became clearer even to himself, and he rushed ahead as if he had read every mind on the lot.

"So he sends you down, with Oley flying you, to get things started, you being innocent of the real intent of your boss. Daly happens to be there, and Oley hears, from your own mouth, that you're spotted. That means that the entire show is thrown under suspicion, although you're innocent in this case.

"And perhaps, as a matter of fact, Oley knew just who Daly was. He's well known, and the fact that he has become a Government employee may be well broadcast over the underworld grapevine system. Anyhow, Oley figures that the projected clean-up is seriously menaced. He takes a chance on getting rid of Daly before he, as a professional investigator, can find out too much. It didn't work.

"Then, it strikes me, Oley decided that perhaps the little soirée wasn't so good. Didn't look too pleasant and sure. He hears a lot about Von Sternberg from our outfit. When he went down to the jail, he might have had any one of several ideas in his head. My idea is that he took a file, pretended to be a Von Sternberg man, gave it to one of the prisoners, and found out where Von Sternberg's hang-out was. On the other hand, one of the outlaws might have been an acquaintance of his. The point is, whatever happened, that Oley decided to try to join Von Sternberg and leave Barr and the circus flat.

"Which he did. He tried to stage a mysterious disappearance, because there was no use of throwing suspicion on himself. Just why his ship was used for the jail delivery that night I don't know. Maybe because it was better than any type Von Sternberg had."

"Seems darned funny," barked Rariden, "that he'd take a long chance like that."

"It wasn't such a long chance. And look at this item. At the worst, Oley was in Mexico with an eighteen-thousand-dollar ship. And what was to prevent him becoming a high-class

man in Von Sternberg's estimation, and also to get more money for himself than he would have had he stuck to the original deal with Barr?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"He tells Von Sternberg that a large chunk of swag is coming across the border on Monday, stolen, doesn't he? Why shouldn't the minions of our friend Fred be waiting to relieve the first thieves of their loot? Hijack it——"

"Rex, it's right as rain ye are!"

"I think so. That explains Barr's nervousness and incessant fussing about Oley, too. Right away Barr seemed to be sure that Oley had double-crossed him some way. Of course, he really isn't sure, but he's afraid so. He'd be a happy man right now if he was positive Oley was dead somewhere in the chaparral between McMullen and San Antone. See? And that's the reason he got himself another ship right away."

"He must 'a' picked up a ship with a crooked pilot right quick."

"Uh-huh. Or maybe the pilot is innocent, but will be forced to do the proper flying at the

proper time. The whole thing is bound to be vague in its exact details. But if we're anywhere near right, see what it means? It means that we grab this circus gang with the goods on, and I've got a scheme whereby, after that, we may lead Mr. Von Sternberg, or several of his big chiefs, right into a perfect little trap and get 'em all and get 'em good!"

"What a day that'll be, what a day!" yelped Rariden, his eyes sweeping the lot.

He was trembling with eagerness. Before he could start to speak, Rex rushed on. Time was short, and he had decided in his mind that Buck must not meet Barr before he had finished.

"What I want you to do is this," he told Buck. "Don't get into any fight with Barr. Stay around the show as our spy, and come into McMullen with it. Collect every bit of information you can, spot all the grifters you can—and work with the detectives in San Antone, too. Then, at McMullen, we'll sweep down on the whole lot as fast as they start to work. That new ship being bought means that Barr hasn't decided to call things off, see?

You'll be taken care of—if we have to get a bill through Congress!"

"Sure I will!" Rariden yapped joyously. "Hang it, we got to catch that truck down to the runs. Come on, Rex. We'll finish down to the cars. Ye'll ride the train this night, if I have t' hide ye!"

Naturally, conversation was off as soon as all had piled into the small truck, fitted out with benches along each side. The boss canvas man and his four assistants, the menagerie top boss, the lot superintendent, and Buck and Rex comprised the group which rode the truck to the trains. The light wagons had shut up shop and were trundling toward the train. They passed a steady succession of vehicles, each driver squatting on a high seat like a flea on a flagpole, handling his six- or eight-horse team skillfully as the procession moved slowly through the town.

Rex was wrought up, but not too excited to get a kick out of the long, sixty-car train painted white, which was standing in the yards. A steady rumbling indicated the progress of loading the flats, and the shouts of the razorbacks—loading crew—cut through the tinkle of

ukuleles. Practically the entire personnel of the show was sitting along the railroad embankment, alongside the cars—ballet girls and men, performers, animal men, canvas men—the day's work over, and their single hour of real relaxation at hand. A quartet sang here, a banjo thrummed there, and a few of the band men were conducting a low concert of their own far down the tracks.

"I'm hungry," announced Buck as they clambered out. "We'll git into the pie car before the mob."

"Is that the same as the privilege car?" Rex inquired, and Buck, now as full of boyish exuberence as an egg is of meat, nodded.

They walked down the line, and the change in him was almost unbelievable. He threw facetious, bluntly witty remarks to dozens of people along the embankment. He kidded and razzed and burlesqued and in general announced to the show at large that Buck Rariden was feeling himself again. Somehow he seemed like the soul of the show to Rex. His mood colored the spirit of the whole troupe, apparently, and they left ripples of laughter in their wake.

The pie car was the last coach on the train. Half its length was split by a lunch counter. After doughnuts and coffee, they wandered off the car and finished their planning. When the train started moving Rex got aboard the privilege car again with Buck, and was shortly immersed in a card game. The players comprised Mr. Piebald Peltzer, boss elephant man, so called because of the prodigious freckles which adorned his countenance; Mr. Jumbo Burnes, a weazened midget from the side show who perched in a special high chair; Ned Graham, star aërialist of the show; and Kink Hudkins, clown extraordinary.

The game progressed but Rex didn't take much interest in it. He was watching and listening to the picturesque crew which packed the car. What interest he had in the game as a game disappeared about the tenth hand and he found his mind, after that, centered exclusively on the general proposition of Monday in McMullen. After he'd forgotten it was his turn to play, he gave up and accompanied Buck back to the stag car where the Irishman slept. Permanent, built-in booths, upper and lower, supplied sleeping accommodations. Each coop

had boxes of assorted sizes and shapes nailed to the walls until it took a snake to get into bed and a mummy to stay quiet enough to avoid hitting something. Every time Rex drew a breath his chest hit a box.

He stayed awhile, talking in whispers with Buck, getting everything set. The train was due in San Antone in an hour and a half, and Rex had no plans for sleep. Sitting on the edge of Buck's bunk, he whispered finally:

"All right, at the matinée to-morrow. And one more thing, Buck. Get this hatred of yours for Duke out of your mind. We've got to work together, and he's the boy that's done most of the figuring on this whole thing. He——"

"A-a-ah, he thinks too much of himself and is too willin' t'——"

"Listen, you simple-minded mick! You brought it on yourself, and you're too sensitive. So's Daly. What you went through, he went through six times over. And he's as good a man as you are, any day! I say that for this reason. From the time you hit San Antone, you take orders from him, if necessary. You're a detective now, and he's boss!"

"Thinks he is," growled Rariden, but there wasn't conviction in his growl.

Working with the flight was an honor to him, but his stubborn grouch, where Daly was concerned, persisted. Somehow Rex was afraid it might put a wrench in the machinery. And he was commencing to wonder whether he hadn't made a fool of himself by confiding in Buck.

Rex spent an hour in the privilege car, and as he swung off the train in the wan light of dawn he found Mr. Buck Rariden just appearing through the vestibule for rolls and coffee. Breakfast was served after the big top was up, and not before, in the cook tent.

The Irishman grinned a delighted grin and waved a horny hand.

"McMullen bound, Rex, and give me regards to the Duke!"

That was Rex's answer!

## CHAPTER XI

### REX LEE IS BAIT FOR THE TRAP

FIVE THIRTY by the clock on Monday afternoon was the exact hour when eight flyers and observers eased their ships down on the McMullen airdrome, alighted therefrom and made their way toward headquarters. They had just finished performing their portion of the field day. They had flown for half an hour, giving such exhibitions as they could. All of them being excellent flyers, those exhibitions were capable of exciting considerable interest. Rex Lee, Dumpy Scarth, Jimmy Jennings and the rest could make an airplane sit up and beg.

It was a great day for McMullen. It looked as if every man, woman and child in that part of Texas was there. The park had been packed for the rodeo finals, and according to Rex's experienced eye, the crowds left on the streets of McMullen could have filled it again. As Buck Rariden had announced jubilantly:

"We'll seat fifteen thousand and squat ten thousand more on the grass this evenin'!"

In pursuance of that laudable ambition, many tons of hay had been ordered for the purpose of bedding down the large number of spectators who couldn't be supplied with seats. The show was just going up for the performance as the flyers returned to the airdrome—the center poles had to be erected to hold the rigging and the lights. No big top, of course.

They were making for headquarters to see what, if anything, had happened during their brief time in the air. The Duke was on duty, with Kennard, getting telephone calls every five minutes from Sheriff Trowbridge's headquarters in McMullen.

"I don't imagine anything'll blow off until tonight," opined George Hickman, "and maybe nothing then."

"Why not?" Rex rose to inquire. "They've got something on a half dozen of those bozoes that Buck pointed out already, haven't they? They're just waiting to nab them, so they can have rope enough to hang themselves."

"Sure. Petty grifting and that stuff," agreed Hickman. "But it strikes me that

maybe between Rangers, deputy sheriffs, Federal men and what not, the boys'll get wise and lay off."

"I don't think so," Penoch O'Reilly observed, "because as near as I could see in the early afternoon the gendarmes were doing things in a very secretive manner. I watched that fox-faced boy who's shadowing Slimy McRae—you said he's a safe-cracker. Say, you could hardly find him even when you were looking for him."

The sheriff certainly had a plan of campaign which was nothing if not complete. A half dozen men who could shoot the eye out of a gnat at fifty yards were secreted in the bank. There was at least one old-time marksman planted in every spot in town which might hold the promise of mazuma to outlaws. Exactly sixteen men, spotted by Rariden, were being inconspicuously shadowed. McMullen, beneath the surface, was an armed camp, and the festive criminals of the Barr-Maxwell Circus didn't have a chance. In fact, the rounding up of that gang was taken so much as a matter of course by the flyers that they scarcely thought

of it. It was what lay beyond their capture that held their youthful minds.

"What's new, Duke?" boomed Penoch O'Reilly as they trooped into the office.

Kennard, Daly and Tex MacDowell were there. Tex had had a wreck two days before, and his wrist and one leg were *hors de combat* for a few days.

"Nothing," stated Daly, "except that five more houses were robbed during the afternoon show and the boys that did it are known. They're not rounding 'em up yet. Still giving them plenty of rope to see just how far they'll go."

"Boy, if they only knew what they were up against!" chuckled Jimmy Jennings.

"Everything is working out very well," agreed Daly evenly. "However, now that you're all here, there are a few changes in plans which I want to suggest."

Quiet fell so suddenly that it was a shock. Daly's face was very serious, his eyes absent looking.

"We agree that it seems very probable that Barr's new Jenny is to be used to carry one

man and the loot over the border," Daly reminded them. "The fact that it's being kept at that outlying field, instead of here on the airdrome, seems to verify our judgment. The others—providing the bank robbery and two or three other big jobs are pulled, as we believe—will doubtless get to the border, they think, by automobile. The fact that three big cars have been hired by circus men this afternoon seems to make that a strong probability.

"I have been thinking and talking it over, and it is my conviction that Von Sternberg, if he plans to enter the situation at all, will be in this position. He doubtless knows by now that the show has hired a new ship. Oley Johannsen will believe, from that, that the original plan will be carried out. Oley will likewise believe that his disappearance is considered to be just that—a wreck somewhere in the mesquite. They probably consider that there was a very slim chance of recognizing the camouflaged ship.

"However, Von Sternberg, with Oley's advice, must figure on two possibilities—carrying the loot over by ship, or on land. Consequently, he will have a ground crew waiting to pick up

the fugitive cars, and also ships in the air to pot an airplane.

"All this has been gone over before, of course, as well as his reckoning on the possible chase of the bandits by us. I do not think that he would send another ship over here, as he did in the case of the jail delivery, to keep us on the ground. He would bank on the fact that we'd learned our lesson, and had arrangements made to circumvent such a possibility, which of course we have."

Those preparations consisted of having a ship, under the chaperonage of Jack Beaman, planted fifteen miles away. Jack would be on the telephone constantly, and the second an outlaw ship tried to squat above the airdrome and keep the others on the ground, Mr. Beaman would sneak up on it and shoot it down with much enthusiasm and not a little gusto.

"I think our original plan of getting the aërial bandits which we believe will be in the air is wrong," Daily went on, talking without haste.

He seemed to be choosing his words carefully, thinking out loud, feeling his way. He was summing up the elements of the situation,

as if to remind his hearers of them and thus be sure that judgment was given in the light of all the facts.

"We agree that if Von Sternberg tried to hijack an airplane, he wouldn't trust to one ship. Two, at least, to avoid the ruining of the coup by a forced landing, and in my judgment he'd send three planes if he has them. They cannot figure on less than approximately half a million dollars, if we've figured out the plans of Jim Barr at all accurately. He wouldn't make elaborate plans for small money.

"Now then, they're in this position. They aren't sure of anything. Oley can't be positive that the projected sacking of McMullen hasn't been given up. They can't be positive that his ship wasn't recognized. A lot of things. All of these things will make them unusually wary. They're so smart they may even take into consideration the possibility of a trap. With Von Sternberg's power in Mexico, he may even have heard that the United States has gotten permission to fly over Mexico.

"The point is this. We planned to put two or three ships in the air at the first indication that the bandits were busy in McMullen, send

them up to sixteen or seventeen thousand feet to lie in wait until our decoy ship was pounced on by Von Sternberg. It seems to me, in the light of all the possibilities in the situation, that putting two ships into the air, no matter how high, would probably be sufficient to warn off the Von Sternberg gang. They'd be watching very closely. The chances of the ships' escaping observation seem to me slight, if the men we're after are as wary as I think they'll be."

"But how else can we do it?" protested Kennard. "If we wait until the decoy ship radios that it has sighted the bandits, and then take off, we wouldn't be sure we could land 'em."

"No," agreed the Duke. "They will probably realize soon after they pounce on the decoy ship that it isn't a Jenny. Of course, they may not. But if I, in the decoy ship, should horse around and try to double back to the river, making them chase me, they'd know with equal surety that there was something wrong. Why would anyone want to land back in this country, and go to jail as well as lose the money, when if they stayed in Mexico and obeyed Von Sternberg they'd at least retain their liberty? So trusting to our D.H.'s taking

off after a radio message, and being able to do anything, has poor chances of success."

"Exactly," Rex broke in. "So the first scheme is the only——"

"I don't think so," the Duke said evenly. "This camouflaged Briston plane we got from Donovan is capable of a hundred and thirty-five miles an hour, you say, and is built for a two-seated fighter. I've been talking to Sergeant Grady, sort of sketching things out. My idea is this.

"I'll take off in the Briston as a decoy, as planned. I'll fly in the back seat. I'll have a contraption which the sergeant can fix up whereby I can control my front guns from the back seat. They'll be camouflaged with a false cowling. I'll also have a special gun mount for rear seat guns which will allow them to be mostly out of sight until needed. A special bar, like a straight scarf mount, across the top of the cockpit——"

"Then what?" demanded Tex MacDowell, crouched in his chair, his eyes burning.

"Why then," Daly said with the utmost calmness, "I fly out over Mexico and they hop me.

They order me to fly south at their direction, of course, which I start to do. I watch my chance, and as soon as it comes I go into action——"

"And fight three ships single handed!" Rex burst forth. "Of all the——"

Rex stopped as his eyes met the Duke's. Suddenly the inferences in his proposal swept over Lee. He was going to bag a considerable number of Von Sternberg's airmen, but it was almost a cinch that he'd lose his own life. It was mad, but it was sublime.

"You see," he went on before the dumbfounded bunch could say much, "I am convinced that any other method possible will result in getting none of them—scaring them off. And, after all, with the parachutes we've got and——"

"I believe you're partly right!" roared Penoch O'Reilly, striding up and down the room in ungovernable nervousness. He, they all remembered, had a special reason for wanting to get Mr. Friederich Von Sternberg. "And it might work, with two men in the ship, one to handle the rear guns! Alone, it's suicide."

"I shouldn't want anyone else to go along," Daly said quietly. "After all, my position is different."

"Means he don't give so much of a hang as we do!" Rex thought as Penoch O'Reilly whirled on the captain and uncorked a rushing stream of words.

"There should be two in the ship, Cap'n. Let me go, please! Honest, Cap'n——"

"How about me?" shrilled fat little Dumpy Scarth, leaping from a desk. "I'll fly and the Duke'll handle the rear guns."

"What the deuce?" Jimmy Jennings interrupted. "Am I some cripple?"

"Shut up, you crazy halfwits!" bellowed Kennard, as everybody but Tex swirled around him.

Tex was the saddest man in the room. He was out of it.

All Rex could think of was Daly. Tex had told him that he had been commencing to brood a bit over the fact that his usefulness as a Government servant was becoming less. This job he considered a way to pay back to society the debt he owed. At the start his experience had been one of his greatest assets. Now it was

becoming a liability, evidently. The word was out that Duke Daly was a "dick."

At the start of their plans he had insisted on the decoy job. Now, to pour a few shots straight from the Government into the hide of its Rio Grande nuisance, he was calmly figuring on making himself a sacrifice. To him, it was paying society a debt he owed.

"What are you going to do with a guy like that?"

"Listen, all of you!" Captain Kennard was saying crisply. "The more I think of it, the more I think that the Duke's idea isn't bad—with two men. With guns camouflaged, you can get into action and completely surprise them. The time's come when we've got to teach the gang a lesson they'll never forget. It's going to be a tough spot; but it's got to be done. Every man that had experience over the lines in France who wants to volunteer will have a chance, including George M. Kennard. Whoever gets the highest spade goes with the Duke."

Beaman and Craveth were nesting fifteen miles away, and Tex was crippled, and almost crying. Consequently, only nine glittering-

eyed, khaki-clad young cocks of the McMullen flight, Border Patrol, United States Army Air Service, stood around a table while the captain dealt out the cards, face up. Back of him the immobile Duke looked on. His eyes had a funny look in them, as though he couldn't understand why they wanted to go.

Card after card dropped. Penoch O'Reilly raised a wild shout as he got the king. Rex was looking at his cards stupidly. He didn't have a chance. Not a spade among them.

"I'm sunk," he muttered, and started to turn away.

He was sick with disappointment.

"Rex, hang it!" roared O'Reilly a second later. "The ace, you lucky stiff!"

And it was. His eyes leaped to Daly's, and the Duke's were warm and eager. He seemed to be aglow with fierce anticipation.

"Great!" was all he said, and Rex echoed it.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

At nine o'clock that night the Duke and Rex were sitting alongside the trim little Briston they had borrowed from Donovan Field for this very purpose. They were in a pasture lot, five miles from town, and casual word had been spread in town that the ship had had a forced landing just at dusk. They were taking no chances on a take-off at the airdrome. Who could tell what the information system of the outlaws was? Or what plans they had centering around the prevention of any ship's leaving the field?

They could see, plainly, the lighted area which indicated the location of the thronged ball park. The circus lights, hung from the center poles, provided a cluster of illumination in the sky.

Rex was nervous as a witch, but the Duke

seemed very calm. Rex was pacing up and down in the darkness.

"Well," he ruminated, just for something to say, "my gamble on Rariden sure won, didn't it? We couldn't have asked for any better coöperation."

"Uh-huh. I guess his mental mood is about like mine."

"Funny, temperamental egg," Rex observed. "Did he give any indication of getting over his hatred for you?"

"No."

Rex's eyes were constantly flickering in the direction of the flight.

"I hope Von Sternberg in person appears to-night," he said, as if he hadn't said it before.

"Let's start by hoping anybody appears," suggested Daly calmly. "It would be a joke if all this careful structure proved to be a delusion——"

"There she is!" Rex shouted, and his voice sounded queer even to himself.

The Duke was on his feet as if shot from springs. A rocket was arching into the sky above the airdrome, followed a second later by another.

As they leaped for the ship Rex scarcely knew whether he was afloat or ashore. Those rockets meant that the circus grifters had struck and been taken.

"The bank, sure as shooting!" Daly was saying as he spun the prop. "That would be the only spot for important money, anyway. I'll bet a fight's on at the circus ship right now, too —somebody'll be trying to get away."

"But we were right, and they must have been nabbed pretty!" Rex shouted.

They had figured that the bank and the ticket wagon would be the principal objectives of the gang. The bank robbery might easily be the work of the whole crew of fifteen or twenty, dependent upon shooting it out in the deserted town, working for speed rather than secrecy.

Never in Rex's life had he felt as he did when he shoved the throttle forward and the Briston leaped ahead into a wall of darkness. It was one of those periods in life which make one glad to be alive.

He didn't bother to glance back at McMullen. He sent the Briston full speed ahead, straight for the river, climbing as steeply as he could. His eyes were concentrated on the starlit sky

ahead, searching it for telltale pricks of fire.

They crossed the river at fifteen hundred feet, going higher every second. They had agreed that if aërial hijackers were going to strike, they would do so close to the border. They could not possibly figure on picking up a lonely ship if they allowed it a half hour in the air. They would have to spot it quickly.

Lee's eyes swept the heavens eagerly. Five miles, ten, south of the border. Below, the endless chaparral was like a black blanket, unrelieved by any sign of civilization. Had their calculations been wrong? Rex was thinking——

The Duke's hand was gripping his arm. Rex followed his pointing finger. High in the sky, coming from the west, and back of them, were three planes, flying a loose V formation.

Rex's eyes met Daly's and his body froze. He felt a lump in his throat, and he was tingling from head to foot.

Steadily they plowed ahead, climbing all the time. They were close to six thousand feet now, as the three bandit planes swooped down upon them. They wouldn't shoot, of course. There would be no point in wrecking them in

the mesquite, with the likelihood of the supposed loot being burned.

Both of them were looking around as one of the ships eased up alongside them. The other two stayed back of them, and four hundred feet higher than they were.

The bandit ship was a Sparrow—a good commercial plane which was almost as fast as their Briston, but not so maneuverable. The others, Rex thought, were the same type. But one figure was in it, and as his eyes strained to identify it he thought, almost, that he could recognize Oley Johannsen.

He was motioning forward, and then the goggle-eyed pilot patted on the cowling before him. Then he pointed back at the other two ships. His meaning was clear. They were to fly as he directed them. He was pointing southwest.

Had the Duke radioed the flight? Rex was thinking, and then realized how silly his doubt was. That was the first thing he would have done. But he had had to wind in the antenna to avoid giving themselves away, so that their course from then on would be unknown to

McMullen. They were strictly on their own.

The bandit pilot seemed to be scrutinizing them closely. Rex's front guns were camouflaged with a false cowling, open at the front end for shooting purposes. In the rear cockpit Daly's double Lewis was out of sight. It was fitted with a special clasp which made its attachment to the circular scarf mount a matter of only a few seconds.

"If that's Oley Johannsen, he may be suspicious of our appearance and our ship," Rex thought to himself.

He was flying with the throttle set at fourteen hundred, to disguise the speed of their ship. He cut the throttle, and yelled to Daly:

"We'd better work fast. I think that's Oley over there."

The Duke nodded, his face pale and set. It was a tough break, having those two ships behind and above them; but they had discussed their exact tactics in every possible situation.

Tensed until he thought something within him would break, he waited. Oley, if Oley it was, was about a hundred feet to their right. He was still peering at them, trying to get closer, but Rex wouldn't let him.

Suddenly Rex felt that grip on his arm. He looked around. Daly leaning forward, nodded. Rex drew in a long breath, and with a prayer he threw his ship into a vertical bank.

In a trice its nose was pointed at the ship alongside them and Rex had his bead. Flame flared from the nose of the Briston as the burst of bullets poured into the ship ahead.

He gasped with relief as he saw the ship falter, and the pilot slump in his seat as he zoomed over it. The next instant it was spinning down, out of control. In the back seat the Duke would have his guns ready now.

What they had hoped would happen did not. The men in the ships above must have been watching them closely. As Rex ended his zoom they had split widely, and one of them was diving at him, guns spitting fire. The windshield was shattered before his eyes as Rex threw his ship into a reënversement to get out of the way.

It was one against two, but they had two gunners and the bandits had only one man to a ship.

The next three minutes were almost a blank to Rex. He was throwing his ship all around

the sky. Always it seemed to him that one of their antagonists had a bead on them. Daly was unable to shoot accurately, because the Briston was like an aërial outlaw, flinging itself about. Rex dived and zoomed and banked and turned. The second he saw one of those planes ahead of him he pumped lead, but mostly he was getting out of the way. The world seemed to be shaking to the roar of the motors. Holes appeared all over the Briston. Back of him, Daly, crouched low, was shooting almost continuously as they were gradually forced down.

Suddenly, as Rex completed a quick turn to get out from under one ship which was diving at them, he saw the second one flash across his nose. He held the gun control down, and kept it there. He pulled up in an Immelmann turn. As he did so he thought that the enemy plane had faltered, as if badly hit. The Briston was vibrating terribly, and the motor was cutting out. They were about at the end of their rope——

"Heh!" he bellowed exultantly then, as he saw the second victim of their guns spinning downward. One against one, now.

He banked again, searching for the remaining

ship. As he did so it seemed that a hail of bullets penetrated the already crippled Briston.

The next second the Duke was yelling in Rex's ear.

"They shot my guns out of commission!" he bellowed.

Banking automatically to save themselves, Rex took a quick look behind him. Both the Duke's hands were bloody. That burst had evidently struck his guns, and his hands had been upon them.

The bandit ship was coming at them again, from the side. He shot as Rex turned toward him, and tried to dive under him. Rex took a quick shot, and his hot guns did not answer.

"A jam!" he groaned, and it seemed that the Duke understood what had happened as quickly as Rex did himself.

He went into a spin, as if out of commission. It lost them precious altitude, but it was the only way to save themselves, at that moment.

Again the Duke was standing up, and he had cut the throttle. Beneath them the two stricken airplanes were burning, spots of red against the chaparral.

"Jump!" he yelled. "You first!"

He was right. So long as they were in the ship, the remaining outlaw would fight it out. He would think that they would, or could trail him home. Doubtless he wanted to escape as badly as they did. Once they jumped, they were helpless, and he might let them go. In the ship, they were lost souls; in a parachute, they had a chance.

The Duke held the ship steady for a moment after Rex had brought it out of the spin. Rex got out on the wing and dived off, his hands on the rip cord ring. If he ever was thankful for anything, it was that they had borrowed chutes from the parachute school at Donovan Field. They were new in those days.

He let himself fall for five seconds before he pulled the ring. He went limp with relief as he felt it open, and the pain which came as he was bent double with the shock of stopping was very sweet to undergo. Swinging in great arcs below the big silk umbrella, he searched the sky for Daly.

He was still in the ship, without guns, and was diving and twisting through the sky.

"He never intended to jump! He's staying

up there so that I can land without being shot at!" Rex told himself dazedly, and the full meaning of what Daly had done scarcely penetrated his stunned mind.

Rex will always believe that that was the Duke's principal reason for making him jump first, and for remaining in a crippled ship, without guns, pretending to fight. But Duke Daly had decided also to make a good job of the clean-up of the Von Sternberg gang.

While Rex was still five hundred feet from the ground, his eyes glued on the roaring battle above, he saw it happen. The altitudes of the ships were hard to figure, but Rex thought that Daly was below, a helpless victim of his armed opponent. But as he watched, a crash almost stunned his eardrums. The motors screamed and then seemed to cease functioning.

Daly had deliberately collided with the last of the bandits.

An instant later a body was hurtling down toward Rex. It had scarcely started earthward when it was followed by a second one. Two white spotches appeared against the sky.

"He's alive!" Rex yelled. "Both of 'em are!"

He saw the two ships, still tangled together, hit and make the third bonfire on the ground. A second later his body was crashing through a low mesquite tree. By good luck he hadn't hit the middle of it, but the tips of its branches, and he didn't break a bone, although he was a scratched and bloody spectacle as he loosed his harness and ran for a small opening in the chaparral, the better to see the descent of the two men above him.

The fight was not over yet. They were about a hundred yards apart, Rex estimated, and they were shooting it out with revolvers!

Just for a moment, though. Suddenly the unknown outlaw—Rex could tell him because he had on neither boots nor puttees, as Daly had—seemed to be hauling on his chute. He gathered in the shroud lines, and he was dropping like a comet. Three hundred feet from the ground he let it flap wide open again to break his speed.

That is where Rex got busy. He should have been under way long before, toward the spot where the jumpers would land.

It was hopeless now, as far as Rex was concerned, but he crashed through nevertheless.

The Duke was not slipping his chute at all. The bandit had landed, and Daly would be an easier mark in a revolver duel than a man on the ground.

Rex saw Daly land, a quarter of a mile from him as he tore through the thin chaparral. He was waiting for Rex, weak and dizzy, but alive.

"I cracked some ribs on a limb," the Duke told Rex slowly. "The Von Sternberg man landed all right—I saw him cut himself loose and take off through the mesquite. No use of chasing him."

"And after all, he put up a good fight," Rex remarked. "Here come the D.H.'s."

And they were on their way, drawn by the fires. With the flashlights, provided for just such emergencies, Rex and the Duke signaled their safety, and three De Havilands frisked over their heads joyously before they started their fifteen-mile trek to the nearest landing field, which was close to the Rio Grande.

It was a long walk, what with the Duke's weakness, but they made it. His finger wounds were minor, and if his ribs bothered him too much he didn't complain. As they plowed along northward, Rex said, after some thought:

"I don't want to be sentimental, Duke, but you're a fool that I'll remember forever for what you foxed me into to-night. Staying up there and making me jump to safety!"

"Don't be silly," the Duke commanded. "I wanted to get the other fellow."

## CHAPTER XIII

### FAIR WEATHER

Back at McMullen they found that their judgment of what had happened was entirely correct.

"Nabbed twelve men at the bank, pretty as you please," Kennard told them. "They couldn't testify fast enough to save themselves a year or so in jail, so old man Barr is behind the bars also. Total haul of eighteen men. And three Von Sternberg flyers. I'd give a lot to know whether Von himself was one of 'em!"

"Wouldn't I?" said Penoch O'Reilly in a heartfelt manner. "But I don't think so. He couldn't be entirely well, you know. He was really in a hospital."

"Which is where the Duke's going right now!" announced Major Searles, the flight surgeon, as he came in the door. "Come on, Duke. You know the news by now, so you sit up no longer!"

Daly went out obediently with the medico, and Rex told his little private story. He was just finishing it when Buck Rariden came bursting in the door of the office.

"The manager, with no bosses, o' the Barr-Maxwell Circus stayed behind t' see how you was, me boy!" he chuckled. "Some detectives we are, what?"

"I'll say," Rex agreed.

"What a fight ye must have had!" he said enviously, and Rex orated for his benefit at some length. When he had finished, Buck got to his feet decisively.

"Pardon me!" he said, his mouth twisted in a lopsided, humorless grin. "I'm on me way to go down on me knees t' the Duke!"

Which he did and that, as far as Rex was concerned, put the last touch to a pleasant episode in line of duty. For it's always fair weather, when good fellows— You know.